
LEARNING ESTATE STRATEGIC PLAN 2021

Joint Report by Service Director, Young People, Engagement & Inclusion and Service Director, Assets & Infrastructure

SCOTTISH BORDERS COUNCIL

28 January 2021

1 PURPOSE AND SUMMARY

- 1.1 This report provides an update to Members on progress with improving the condition and suitability of many schools and seeks approval of a process and actions to deliver a Learning Estate Strategic Plan.**
- 1.2 The report provides highlights to Members of the progress which has been made in recent years, improving the condition and suitability of many schools. Despite huge improvements in the physical fabric of many buildings, it is recognised that much more has to be done and work is progressing to ensure future investment in the School Estate is planned, managed and delivered in line with empirical data and an overall strategy for the Learning Estate. This paper also highlights the many challenges facing the Learning Estate in the Scottish Borders and seeks approval of a process and actions to deliver a Learning Estate Strategic Plan which is fit for purpose, responsive to changing population patterns, sustainable in the longer term, and accessible to all. The strategy will provide learning environments to deliver 21st century education as part of a wider place making agenda. To deliver this vision, meet the principles of Scotland's Learning Estate Strategy and to address the three key national education and skills priorities:
1. Getting it Right for Every Child (GIRFEC)
 2. Curriculum for Excellence (CfE)
 3. Developing the Young Workforce (DYW)

A number of policies and methodologies will also require to be updated.

- 1.3 The Learning Estate is a significant and valuable resource for the communities of the Scottish Borders. The ongoing revenue costs for the Learning Estate and the capital costs of providing a Learning Estate fit for the future are significant. It is therefore vital, in light of these material costs, that the Learning Estate is managed and planned in an efficient, effective and strategic manner and that that all priorities meet the wider strategic objectives of the Council and the needs of our communities.

- 1.4 Scottish Borders Council has high aspirations for the Learning Estate, reflecting the value that we place on learning, supported by our vision for well designed, maintained and managed buildings to facilitate learning for the whole community and the future strategy will inform prioritisation of investment while seeking to adhere to the principles of community place making.
- 1.5 In order to drive innovation and creativity in how investment is used to best effect, we must engage with communities and partners to identify how, together, we meet changing demands and community needs.
- 1.6 The Report makes recommendations regarding future workstreams and policies that will be required to deliver the Learning Estate Strategic Plan. The outcome of this work will be brought forward for further approval at appropriate junctures and, once approved, these policies and workstreams will be incorporated into the Learning Estate Strategic Plan.

2 RECOMMENDATIONS

2.1 It is recommended that Scottish Borders Council agrees:-

- (a) to progress the Learning Estate Strategic Plan using a wider place planning approach;**
- (b) to the development of a policy on small schools which determines triggers and process to place schools under review;**
- (c) that core facts assessments of schools are reviewed on a staggered basis, with 20% of assessments being carried out each year;**
- (d) that the school roll projection policy and methodology is reviewed and amended; and**
- (e) that methodologies for determining capacities of schools be reviewed and adjusted.**

3 BACKGROUND

- 3.1 Guiding principles were agreed for the School Estate Review in January 2015. Work on this strategy has been ongoing since then to improve educational benefits for children and young people and to improve learning opportunities for communities. This has included the creation of an intergenerational Learning Campus in Jedburgh and the closure of several unsustainable schools. Recommendations have also been approved regarding the replacement of Earlston and Eyemouth Primary Schools and the progression of proposals regarding the learning provision in Galashiels and Hawick (November 2018) with the acceleration of Peebles High School provision following the fire in November 2019.
- 3.2 In November 2017, approval was given to extend the review to include "Increased educational and learning opportunities for all generations within the community". On this basis, work was undertaken to prepare Individualised Strategic Plans for each of the Secondary Schools which are still to be replaced, to include consideration of campus and intergenerational models.
- 3.3 In September 2019, the Scottish Government announced a new **Learning Estate Strategy** with a further £1bn of funding available with the key objectives of:
 - (a) supporting the delivery of Scotland's Learning Estate Strategy;
 - (b) improving the condition and suitability of the Learning Estate;
 - (c) establishing links across the learner journey where appropriate; and
 - (d) supporting sustainable estate planning and improved stewardship.
- 3.4 In December 2020, Scottish Government confirmed that funding support for the replacement of both Galashiels Academy and Peebles High School would be awarded.
- 3.5 This Learning Estate Strategic Plan has been scoped in response to the evolution of the School Estate Strategy and to incorporate the challenges being addressed in the Council's **Fit for 2024** strategies. The Learning Estate Strategy reflects that the Council requires to adopt a joint approach with communities and partners to rethink and reshape the property portfolio to ensure that it meets all current and future needs, maximises and makes best use of resources and is sustainable.

4 DEVELOPING THE LEARNING ESTATE STRATEGIC PLAN

- 4.1 The Learning Estate comprises 59 Primary Schools, 1 Complex Additional Needs Primary School and 9 Secondary Schools. The Learning Estate extends to 139.2 hectares and is divided into 9 clusters based on the catchment areas of the Secondary Schools. In Session 2020 there are approximately 14,750 children attending our schools.

- 4.2 "Connecting People, Places and Learning" is Scotland's Learning Estate Strategy. Produced by Scottish Government and COSLA, the Strategy has 10 guiding principles:
1. Learning environments should support and facilitate excellent joined-up learning and teaching to meet the needs of learners;
 2. Learning environments should support the wellbeing of all learners, meet varying needs to support inclusion and support transitions for all learners;
 3. The Learning Estate should be well-managed and maintained, making the best of existing resources, maximising occupancy and representing and delivering best value;
 4. The condition and suitability of learning environments should support and enhance their function;
 5. Learning environments should serve the wider community and, where appropriate, be integrated with the delivery of other public services in line with the place principle;
 6. Learning environments should be greener, more sustainable, allow safe and accessible routes for walking, cycling and wheeling and be digitally enabled;
 7. Outdoor learning and the use of outdoor learning environments should be maximised;
 8. Good consultation about learning environments, direct engagement with learners and communities about their needs and experiences, and an involvement in decision making processes should lead to better outcomes for all;
 9. Collaboration across the Learning Estate, and collaboration with partners in localities, should support maximising its full potential; and finally,
 10. Investment in Scotland's Learning Estate should contribute towards improving learning outcomes and support sustainable and inclusive economic growth.
- 4.3 Delivery of the Learning Estate Strategy must be firmly aligned to the policy aims set out in the National Improvement Framework (NIF) of achieving excellence and equity for all children and young people and closing the poverty related attainment gap.
- 4.4 The Learning Estate should support the three key national education and skills priorities:
1. Getting It Right for Every Child (GIRFEC);
 2. Curriculum for Excellence (CfE); and
 3. Developing the Young Workforce (DYW).

- 4.5 Scottish Borders Council is committed to creating the best possible learning and teaching environments for all children and young people and, over the last 5 years, the Learning Estate has benefited from new Primary Schools in Duns, Galashiels and Kelso, a High School in Kelso and a regional Special Needs School in Earlston. Jedburgh Campus was due to be operational from April 2020, however, as a result of lockdown, this was delayed to August 2020.
- 4.6 Through the commitment to fully implement the 1140 hours of Early Learning and Childcare for all children by August 2020, new Nursery facilities have been created in St Boswells, Yetholm and Galashiels, additional provision has been created in Chirnside, Galashiels, Duns, Hawick, Lauder and Stow and there are new provisions in Peebles, Innerleithen and Swinton due for completion in January 2021. From August 2020, all 3 and 4 year olds and all eligible 2 year olds can access 1140 hours of Early Learning and Childcare. Further commitments in the Capital Plan for Early Years will enable future proofing of this provision in Galashiels and Hawick, and the expansion of places in Eyemouth.
- 4.7 Our young people need to develop skills to be flexible and adaptable, with the capacity to continue to develop new skills that they will need for the rapidly changing challenges of life, learning and work. The places where learning happens need to be flexible and adaptable to respond to the changing demands. Design needs to look forward and reflect places of work and study beyond the school years, as well as meeting the needs of all activities, not just the traditional cores. Innovative design enables boundaries to be pushed to offer success. In the post-Covid-19 world, workplaces will look very different with remote and flexible working being more prevalent, and in preparing our young people for this, learning environments must also adapt.

5 COMMUNITY ASSET

- 5.1 The creation of the Intergenerational Campus in Jedburgh brings a new model for delivery of education, as well as enhanced community facilities. The educational 3-18 model reduces transitions and enables a seamless curriculum to flow from Early Years through broad general education to Senior Phase. Teacher expertise can be fully utilised across all stages and pastoral support can be focused on families throughout the full educational journey, while bringing all opportunities and services for the wider community, together with educational services, meaning members of the community of all ages, can access social, cultural, educational, sporting, business and service needs in one place, before, during and after the traditional school day. Suites of learning spaces offer a mixture of flexible, agile, specialist and traditional rooms, which are appropriate to the nature of the activity and respond to the needs of the learners at different stages in the learning journey supports a range of opportunities for learners to explore, collaborate, create and develop. Events in 2020 demanded even greater flexibility and required remote learning to be implemented. The benefits and opportunities for this model should be considered as part of future design. It is and will continue to be essential to involve young people and professionals in creating this vision to plan learning.

5.2 The Learning Estate is a community asset, which can support the achievement of improved outcomes for the whole community. It is essential therefore that the Estate supports the local context and reflects the priorities of a community. Investment in the Learning Estate offers the opportunity for a place based approach to improve local outcomes, co-ordinating and integrating local services to support communities and progress the public sector reform agenda. In the same way that young people and education professionals need to engage in consultation and design, so do all partners, stakeholders and wider community interests.

6 DESIGNING FOR THE FUTURE

- 6.1 The Scottish Government has an ambitious climate change policy target for all buildings to be near zero carbon by 2050. Reaching this target will require a change in attitude towards energy, particularly in relation to new buildings. Increasing energy efficiency in building performance must be amongst the core objectives of all new infrastructure projects for these ambitious targets to be achieved. Achievement of these core objectives needs strategic level support and should be incorporated into planned investment.
- 6.2 New forms of service delivery, and new agile forms of learning enabled by digital technology allow integration of learning experiences and the creation of new and diverse skills. The use of digital as part of the planning of the future estate, and future strategies for learning and community use should be incorporated into planned investment.
- 6.3 “Inspire Learning” is Scottish Borders Council’s intent to create a world-class learning environment that will reduce inequality and improve academic achievement across the Scottish Borders. There are a number of fundamental components to the vision of a Digital Learning Transformation Programme including:
1. Creating a fast, reliable WiFi network in every school with internet access for every young person;
 2. Flexible audio visual learning spaces in all our schools through equipping every classroom with the wireless, efficient technology solution;
 3. Providing all teachers, all secondary students and all P4 to P7 students with a mobile digital learning device for use wherever it makes the learning experience better;
 4. Providing mobile digital learning devices in P1 – P3 for use wherever it makes the learning experience better;
 5. Providing teachers with top quality, accredited professional digital learning opportunities.
- 6.4 The implementation of digital learning is a critical factor in design of our Learning Estate and the opportunities to do things differently as a result of this programme will be fully embraced in considerations for the future

Estates Strategy. The value of the Inspire Programme was demonstrated in the response to Covid-19, with immediate access to remote learning for pupils.

7 THE CHALLENGES AND MOVING FORWARD

- 7.1 The Learning Estate is not, however, sustainable in its current form. There are too many older buildings in relatively poor physical condition, many of which would require major works to create appropriate learning environments for the 21st century. Such improvements even if they could be made to the physical condition of buildings, however, would not solve the educational issues faced as a result of the very small and falling rolls in many schools.
- 7.2 In academic session 2020/21, 16 schools have rolls of 50 or fewer – an increase of 4 on the previous year, and 3 of these have only 1 class. There has been a focus on attempting to support these very small schools to be more sustainable through working with parents to identify what may support the schools. Actions such as catchment reviews and implementation of out of school care are being trailed, and some welcome the addition of Early Learning and Childcare provisions. However, for many the rolls continue to decline and therefore delivery of a full and balanced curriculum remains a challenge.
- 7.3 Since 2018, 4 schools – St Margaret’s (Hawick), Ettrick, Hobkirk and Eccles/Leitholm have been formally closed. For all of these schools, a sharp decline in roll occurred when the number of classes dropped to one. At this point, parents exercised their right to make placing requests to bigger schools and the educational benefits of children being in a wider peer group and in more appropriate environments were strong enough to gain Scottish Government approval to close the schools.
- 7.4 The decision to close a school is never taken lightly, and there is a rigorous process of options appraisal, consultation and ultimately Scottish Government approval to be undertaken, guided by the Schools (Scotland) (Consultation) Act 2010 (the Act). In Scottish Borders, 56% of schools are classified as “rural schools” and special consideration has to be given to these under the Act. Ultimately, the educational benefit and outcomes for the young people must be the key consideration in the decision to propose a school closure.
- 7.5 It is, however, important to balance the resistance to closing or merging schools in some instances with the situations where parental choice is in favour of change. In each of the four recent closures in SBC, the driver for change was parents making the choice to have their children attend bigger schools. It cannot be assumed, therefore, the communities will not be receptive to change where educational benefits are clear.
- 7.6 Demographics in rural communities have changed with mechanisation in farming seeing a reduction in employment opportunities and a migration of

families to towns and larger villages with more amenities. Families living in more rural locations, however, are more accustomed to travelling to access facilities and travel to school could be considered in this manner.

- 7.7 School buildings can, in some locations, be vibrant community hubs and this is a key consideration to be taken into account. However, in many small communities, village halls, for example, serve this role more fully and the school is only utilised for education and therefore accessed for limited amounts of time.
- 7.8 In the larger towns, where there are several schools in a small geographical area, many (often most) children do not attend the Primary School which serves their catchment area. There are many reasons for this, including family background with school, childcare arrangements or travel to work arrangements. This results in some schools being over-subscribed and others operating significantly under capacity.

8 ASSESSMENTS, PROJECTION POLICY AND CAPACITY

- 8.1 Where there is investment being made in new provisions, however, it would be remiss of the Council not to look more widely at the opportunity presented to offer positive outcomes and benefits to as many service users as possible. Through evaluating the current provision in each cluster and scoping what an ideal operating model in terms of education of buildings could look like, we will work with communities to ensure all opportunities arising from investment are identified and fully explored.
- 8.2 For some clusters, the provision of a new school or planned investment in existing buildings will offer natural opportunities to undertake this review. For others, a policy to undertake cyclical reviews with a trigger mechanism to undertake a review where there is a significant issue or change in a school will be implemented. Triggers for review may include, for example, reduction in the roll to level of 50, a change in the number of classes from 3 to 2 or 2 to 1, or where operating costs are significantly above the SBC average per pupil. Factors such as overall travel distances to nearest alternative provision, availability of Early Learning and Childcare and provision of alternative facilities in a community would also be critical in making such considerations. Some communities in Scottish Borders are so isolated, for example, that it would not in most circumstances be practical or beneficial not to have a school in the community unless there were so few pupils that it became educationally restrictive.
- 8.3 Considerations which will be made in any review may include proposals such as full mergers, changes to catchments or different models of educational delivery such as in Jedburgh where Ancrum Primary operates P1-5 only.
- 8.4 When reviewing provision in any area, a number of key factors need to be taken into account. These would include matters such as future roll projections, existing and potential future use of the building and impact on

the community of any changes. In rural schools, a full pre-consultation and options appraisal of all reasonable alternatives to closure must be completed prior to any formal proposals being made. The educational benefits will be the driver for all proposals; with special consideration of the potential impact on communities of the proposals.

8.5 Robust data and background information must underpin the Learning Estate Strategy and the Scottish Government Core Facts Guidance (November 2017), sets out the objectives for the 21st century school; to deliver better public services that focus on:

1. The child at the centre – meeting the needs of individual children;
2. The school at the heart of the community – meeting the needs of communities.

8.6 Core facts measure condition, sufficiency and suitability and enable Scottish Borders Council to meet the immediate objective of capturing a broad strategic picture of the Learning Estate and are a critical factor in determining priorities. Core facts are reported annually to Scottish Government.

8.7 The data from the most recent condition and suitability surveys identified a number of common issues which are being addressed through a rolling programme of works utilising capital funding in the School Estate block.

Security	A programme of works to provide secure receptions, where visitors can be welcomed into a space which is appropriate to wait without being able to gain access to the rest of the building without authorisation has been implemented and is ongoing.
Accessibility	The majority of works identified in an accessibility audit have been implemented across high schools. Works in Primary schools continues and is responsive to need.
Pupil toilets	All pupil toilet blocks have been graded to identify those in most need of upgrading and annual investment enables an ongoing programme.
Dining and Kitchen facilities	Ongoing investment is required to replace aging equipment. Kitchens and dining spaces are upgraded where appropriate to improve the offering to young people.
Pupil Social Areas	Across all High Schools, young people identified the lack of social and study spaces as a key requirement which has not been possible in many instances. Investment to upgrade and furnish these areas has been allocated and includes a focus on effective use of outdoor spaces.

- 8.8 Sufficiency is concerned with sufficiency of the School Estate (capacity) and has three elements: physical capacity, the school roll and projected trend and projected occupancy.
- 8.9 The basis for determining the capacity of Secondary Schools was presented to and agreed by Scottish Borders Council in 2003. A number of assumptions when determining secondary capacity now require to be revisited particularly:
1. The exclusion of accommodation that cannot accommodate 30 or 20 pupils when, in practice, many classes could beneficially operate from rooms of lower capacity;
 2. The increasing role of technology resulting in changing methods of teaching and changing requirements for specialist accommodation;
 3. The assumption that if Secondary School accommodation is used for 80% of the time and 80% occupied is considered 100% capacity. This model is inefficient and unrealistic.
- 8.10 Each Primary School's physical capacity is determined by the space available in terms of the number and size of classrooms. A minimum of 1.7 square metres per pupil is recommended. The basis for determining capacity in Primary Schools also requires to be reviewed. The physical size has historically been ignored in giving an overall capacity for a school in favour of assuming that maximum class sizes (relating to teacher pupil ratios) multiplied by the number of classrooms gives the total capacity. This is unrealistic since, in a small school, there will always be composite classes with 25 pupils as the maximum, and therefore a school with the physical capability to accommodate 120 pupils in 3 large classrooms may be artificially limited.
- 8.11 Scottish Border's school age population is declining, leading to surplus capacity in schools. Addressing this issue is complex, however, with account needing to be taken of travel distances, accessibility, pupils' social needs and the importance of schools as a resource within isolated communities.
- 8.12 A review has been undertaken to analyse roll projections calculated in 2012/13 against actual pupil numbers each year. As would be expected, the level of accuracy of the school roll projections reduce as time progresses. The last projection were produced in 2012/13 and, as a result, were becoming very inaccurate. The roll projected 7 years ago for 2019/20 is on average 12% higher than the actual school populations. It is recommended therefore that further work be undertaken to evaluate both the methodology and the calculations of all projections and this role should be undertaken as part of the wider data analysis function in Education with input from relevant services such as Estates and Planning.

9 COMMUNITY AND PARTNER APPROACH

- 9.1 Working with our partners and communities, a joint approach is required to rethink and reshape the collective property portfolio, not just that belonging to SBC, to ensure that it:
1. meets current and future needs of service users, communities and service providers;
 2. maximises and make best use of investment opportunities of both existing revenue and capital resources as well as external funding opportunities; and
 3. is sustainable and affordable in terms of both ongoing funding and energy efficiency.
- 9.2 The approach taken in Jedburgh; to review all education and SBC/Live Borders facilities across the cluster and identify opportunities to improve outcomes through co-location and shared provision will be developed and applied to the other areas where new provision is proposed. This place agenda will involve early public consultation in each community to identify needs and priorities as well as opportunities.
- 9.3 Further work is required in each community, particularly around the wider Education Estate and the detail of how this will be approached for each cluster will be developed as part of engagement in a wider place making consultation.

10 IMPLICATIONS

10.1 Financial

There are no financial implications relating to the recommendations of the report, however, any proposals resulting from the process, if approved, will be dependent on capital investment. The model of Scottish Government funding support available for the replacement of Galashiels and Peebles Secondary provision is significantly different to previous awards and the detail of this will be discussed with Scottish Government. The Capital Plan also continues to support investment across the Learning Estate further through the block allocations and remains under review to confirm affordability and deliverability.

10.2 Risk and Mitigations

The main risk to these proposals is a legal risk – the terms of the School (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010 and other legislation can limit the Council's ability to proceed with certain proposals regarding permanent changes to the Learning Estate. These risks can be mitigated by ensuring adherence to the legislation and its processes and by carrying out robust and extensive pre-consultation engagement with the communities in the clusters regarding the provision of education. Legal Services will continue to engage with Children & Young People Services and Assets & Infrastructure Services regarding all informal and formal engagement and consultation.

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