
PROPOSAL FOR CLOSURE OF THE WILTON CENTRE, PRINCES STREET, HAWICK

Report by Lesley Munro, Director – Education & Children’s Services

EDUCATION SUB-COMMITTEE

23 April 2024

1 PURPOSE AND SUMMARY

- 1.1 This report proposes the permanent closure of the Wilton Centre, Hawick (currently temporarily closed) due to the relocation of SEBN services to local cluster schools following the Covid pandemic, and the unsuitable condition of the Wilton Centre building precluding it as a viable sustainable asset of the school estate without significant capital investment.**
- 1.2 It aims to set out the proposal to close The Wilton Centre, and to agree the commencement of an informal consultation engagement period of 6 weeks to engage communities to provide views and opinions on the proposal.

2 RECOMMENDATIONS

- 2.1 I recommend that the Committee approve the Proposal Document and approve the commencement of the informal consultation process to begin by publishing the Proposal Document on Wednesday, 8 May 2024 and to close for views and opinions from community stakeholders on Friday 28 June 2024.**

3 BACKGROUND

3.1 Redesign of SEBN

- a. The Wilton Centre also known colloquially as “The Arches” used to house the SEBN (Social, Emotional and Behavioural Needs Service). SEBN is a support service to children and young people across the Scottish Borders region.
- b. The SEBN Service is a responsive service which continues to give support to children today. The current service provides this within children’s existing school settings as the Wilton Centre (The Arches) was not reopened following door closure in the Covid-19 Pandemic. The building was closed after the summer holidays of August 2021.
- c. Historically (pre-Covid-19 Pandemic in 2020) the SEBN Service provided in Reach Placements and Outreach Placements. In Reach Placements were within the building in The Wilton Centre, Hawick on a part-time or full-time placement basis. The Covid-19 Pandemic resulted in The Wilton Centre’s doors being closed and to ensure continuation of service, the SEBN Service was reformatted to provide that SEBN Service within the service users mainstream schools.

3.2 The aim was also to provide a more inclusive service providing children with SEBN support within their existing school set up instead of requiring them to travel (sometimes excessively long distances) across the large Borders region to attend SEBN placements within the Wilton building in Hawick itself. The families of those attending the placements at that time were asked whether they agreed with this reformat proposal and their preference was that they concurred. They advised that they wished a far more inclusive service within their young people’s mainstream clusters schools rather than travelling to The Wilton Centre each day. Reasons for same included an increased demand to have greater and more flexible resources in the young people’s own communities. This was especially the case from the older service users in terms of secondary provision. It was felt that it was a step backwards in terms of the goal to be working inclusively and across Local Authority schools if they continued to be required to be transported to the Wilton Centre. The families of service users expressed a desire to a more localised and wanted a more inclusive approach, from an emotional, educational and peer group point of view. The view was expressed that there were little to no educational benefits from the outdated approach of transporting children great distances to an elderly and out of date building, which was in the main unhelpful to their educational and emotional wellbeing.

3.3 Consideration is given in the proposal document to the impact of on future learners under the SEBN service if the Wilton Centre is permanently closed. The proposal details why it is felt, on balance, that there are little to no drawbacks to future learners to have access to closer SEBN facilities and resources which support their learning and emotional needs in their local mainstream settings more in line with the educational benefits of inclusion and nurture approached in their mainstream schools. The proposal document suggests that this approach sits in line with the Scottish Government directions to continue to promote mainstreaming as a priority and a higher

level of needs, requires prioritising the offering in universal settings rather than in standalone units.

3.4 This new localised approach sat firmly on all fours with the principle of “inclusion for all” commitment from Scottish Borders Council 2015 strategic approach to Inclusion and sat in line with the Standard in Schools Act 2000 which recognised the rights of all children and young people to be in education alongside their peers in mainstream schools alongside the presumption to mainstream in terms of Scottish Government Guidance “ Guidance on Presumption to Provide Education in a Mainstream setting” (March 2029).

3.5 **The Building**

The Wilton Centre had been regularly reviewed for the last 20 years and was deemed to require significant investment to modernise it and make it fit for the modern age as an educational setting for the future. It was reviewed by the architectural lead as part of an Estates Review in 2018, and it was accepted that the building needed significant capital investment for it to be fit as an educational setting meeting reasonable standards for schools in terms of Schools for the Future or in respect of Scottish Government Guidance for school estates. Since doors closed in terms of the pandemic in 2020, maintenance budgets are required to keep it wind, watertight and secure.

3.6 Turner and Townsend for Scottish Borders Council provided a suitability survey dated 29 January 2024 which rated the building as “D”. This is the lowest rating in terms of suitability. “D” means that the building does not support the delivery of services to children and communities and that the school building and grounds seriously impede the delivery of activities that are needed for children and communities in the school.

3.7 Prior to this survey being completed, and whilst the building was in use, SEBN staff also expressed concerns about the building both in terms of the elderly building design giving rise to layout concerns, and safe passage spaces within the building which limited the ability to define safe spaces, as well as concerns re accessibility due to the nature of the design and curricular limitations leading from those.

3.8 There are two buildings within the Wilton Centre. The main building is accessed by a number of stairs and a separate annexe is accessed from the playground with a tarmac playground to the front. There is no accessible entrance. This led to “safety upon entry” concerns for staff and issues regarding safeguarding. The age of the building meant that it does not have the right balance of traditional and/or modern flexible working spaces (although attempts had been made over the years to create a free flow play area for younger children attending placements). Essentially, the older building design meant that safe passage through the building or the ability to create safe spaces was compromised. The age of the building and the design of same also led to curricular limitations, particularly in terms of secondary aged pupils on placements, who were unable to access a more diverse range of curricular offerings. For example, the building offered no access to technology or science or quality Physical Education provision. This in turn meant that staff felt that the children attending placements were not able to gain a more bespoke learning suitable for them. The educational limitations of the older building design and fabric is indubitably clear.

3.9 The Building is Listed. Options for its future will be considered by the Council's Assets/Estate Management Team and reported to Elected Members for consideration. There are suggestions that community interest groups have expressed desire in the Wilton Centre and this is to be welcomed and ongoing dialogue encouraged. This could include community asset transfer provisions once this proposal to permanently close has been considered and a decision made.

4 PROPOSAL

4.1 The aim of this proposal paper is to advise and inform Scottish Borders Council communities across the region about the background to this proposal to close the Centre permanently, due to the reasons explained above and to allow an informed approach to be taken to the proposal and to explain why the proposal has been made in terms of the SEBN service redesign and building fabric unsuitability concerns. The next stage is to invite comment from communities and stakeholders in terms of the informal consultation period to begin on 8th May and to close 28th June 2024, before a decision is made thereafter on whether a formal consultation requires to be undertaken in terms of the Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010 (As Amended); and to make a recommendation in terms of same.

5 IMPLICATIONS

5.1 Financial

Financial Concerns are below:

There were significant budgetary implications each year when the building was used by the SEBN Service in terms of the transport costs of the service users, cost of staff and the maintenance/upkeep of the Wilton Centre itself as is addressed in the proposal report. Since temporary closure, those costs have reduced substantially – although calculating those savings is difficult to do as SEBN staff were redeployed to local cluster schools and where possible for expansion additional staff were recruited. Whilst it is temporarily closed, the building itself requires upkeep and insurance which are costs which require to be met. The Costs of maintenance for the closed building (2021- today's date) to include the corporate landlord utilities and statutory repairs and maintenance are approximately circa £12,000 per year as per the proposal report. The Building Suitability survey from Turner and Townsend (Appendix 2), demonstrates the significant capital investment which would be required to bring the building up to a standard acceptable for use within the modern era. The redesign of the SEBN Service means that this need to modernise is redundant.

5.2 Risk and Mitigations

(a) The proposal report describes all the elements of risk that have been identified in relation to this proposal in terms of the impact of the proposal to close the Wilton Building, and no specific additional concerns need to be addressed, although it is important to note that the reason for informally consulting on the proposal to close the building permanently is to obtain wide ranging opinions and views from communities and stakeholders which is it is anticipated may well identify

further areas of risk which need to be considered. The Local Authority will pledge to work with communities affected to identify and overcome any issues which may arise from the proposal to permanently close the building of the Wilton Centre. However, the Local Authority's view is that this is likely to be minimal given the reallocation of the resources to the children's own cluster/catchment schools within the redesign and the fact that the families of those attending children within the service advised that they would prefer this more localised inclusive approach to cut down on commuting and promote inclusion within the mainstream schools. It is anticipated that any issues in terms of this therefore would be minimal as the overwhelming feeling at that time was that this was a better approach for their young people.

- (b) In addition, the building itself is currently closed and lies empty. Upkeep is required to keep it wind and watertight and to ensure it is kept locked and secure. As the building has not been occupied for several years, several areas in the building are in a state of poor disrepair and internally the building is in a poor state of repair, particularly the west side of the building where upon areas of the ceiling and wall lathe plaster are badly crumbling. This information is available within the Suitability Survey (Appendix 2).
- (c) Any positive attempt to re purpose or an adaptive reuse of the building is thought will go some way to redress to some extent, the loss of the building to the local community and to lessen the result of an empty building within the Hawick Community.

5.3 **Integrated Impact Assessment**

- (a) Implementing and approving the Proposal to close the Wilton Centre and agreeing to an informal consultation period to gauge community and stakeholders opinions and views may raise concerns relating to discrimination, particularly if it inadvertently affects individuals with disabilities. The IIA has been completed and it is felt that under the Equality duty the proposal will help to eliminate discrimination. The permanent closure of the building follows the temporary closure following Covid-19 and the redesign of the SEBN Service to allow children of the service to attend their local cluster schools which has helped to promote inclusion. The building itself was deemed not fit for purpose and failed inspections as to suitability, thus closure will ensure children of the SEBN Service will not be disadvantaged.
- (b) It is felt the proposal will help promotion of equality of opportunity, not hinder it, due to the advancement of integration and inclusion – eg enhanced closer to home learning environments and removal of long taxi rides to and from school advancing the equality of opportunity and advancement of young people in the SEBN Service “belonging in their local community” rather than being removed from it as was what happened when the building was used by the SEBN Service.
- (c) It is felt that the proposal will help foster good relations between those who have different equality characteristics as reformatting from an outreach centre to local community cluster schools can only and encourage good relations between those who have different equality characteristics sits squarely with promotion of inclusion and any staff, children or parents with restricted mobility in terms of requiring to

attend an unsuitable and inaccessible building will have been removed by the closure of the building.

- (d) It is felt that any negatives in terms of any impact in terms of equality groups would be mitigated with the continuation, promotion and development of more inclusive practices with a focus on universal and more targeted provisions in schools. Crucial that this informal consultation is to be as open as possible regarding communication to address and mitigate any potential concerns or potential discrimination concerns about the proposal.

5.4 **Sustainable Development Goals**

The UN sustainable development Goal Checklist has been completed and it has been identified that the Proposal re permanent closure of the Wilton Centre, Hawick and to agree the commencement of an informal pre-consultation engagement review period of 6 weeks to engage communities to provide views and opinions on the proposal would have a positive impact in respect of the 4th UN goal to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promotion of lifelong learning and opportunities for all. This is in relation to the identification and tackling of barriers in terms of inequality and diversity, and how it assists with the policy and goal of "inclusion" to ensure that access for enhanced opportunities for pupils within the SEBN Service within their own cluster school and not in a separate unit, would promote diversity, and inclusion and a greater educational benefit overall helping to eliminate barriers and disadvantages. The building is in an unsuitable state for a modern fit for purpose school estate and, as such, if such a proposal were to be recommended to close and the building repurposed by a community group who has shown interest, this would go some way to redress to some extent the loss of the building to the local community.

5.5 **Climate Change**

Not applicable

5.6 **Rural Proofing**

Not applicable

5.7 **Data Protection Impact Statement**

There are no personal data implications arising from the proposals contained in this report.

5.8 **Changes to Scheme of Administration or Scheme of Delegation**

Not applicable.

6 **CONSULTATION**

- 6.1 The Director (Finance & Procurement), the Director (Corporate Governance), the Chief Officer Audit and Risk, the Director (People Performance & Change), the Clerk to the Council, the Finance Business Partner and Corporate Communications have been consulted and any comments received will be incorporated into the final report.

Approved by

Lesley Munro

Director – Education & Children’s Services

Author(s)

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Background Papers: Proposal Paper
Suitability Survey Report

Previous Minute Reference: N/A

Note – You can get this document on tape, in Braille, large print and various computer formats by contacting the address below. Marina Urie can also give information on other language translations as well as providing additional copies.

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