

School Estates Management **Good Practice Guide**

*Examples and suggestions of good practice for councils
considering a review of their school estate.*



COSLA

Produced by a short life working group convened by COSLA's Education Executive

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Introduction

1. Every council in Scotland needs to ensure that its schools are the best possible places to learn. This often means assessing the suitability of some schools, and taking difficult decisions on their long-term future. This guide is aimed at helping all local authorities to make these decisions in a way that involves stakeholders and affords all relevant parties access to key information at an appropriate time. It contains some suggested good practice around the process of consultation and evidence gathering, as well as possible approaches to reduce the anxiety that can be associated with changes to school estates.
2. Councils are responsible for education services at a local level, which requires them to respond to an ever-changing landscape. They have a statutory duty to make adequate and efficient provision of school education across their entire area far beyond the current school population and pattern of demand. This requires them to look at a broader range of issues from a different perspective to that of parents and local communities, who may have a focus on one school or locality at a particular point in time.
3. School estates are diverse within and across both urban and rural local authorities, with schools varying in age, type, condition, and suitability of location. Councils need to keep the suitability and condition of their schools under constant review and to adjust their school estate and pattern of supply of education to match an ever changing pattern of demand. Demographic or transport changes can result in the need for more or less school buildings with changing populations and settlement patterns.
4. Furthermore, some schools simply do not support today's learning and teaching environment. The nature of education is also changing in line with 21st century cultural and societal changes meaning that councils need to consider whether school facilities are positive learning and teaching environments. The School Estates Strategy builds on this, and requires a demonstration of councils' commitment to providing the best possible learning environment for children in the 21st century.
5. Curriculum changes can require alterations to the demands on school estates. Councils need to ensure that the school buildings are appropriate to respond to both national curricula and local curricular variations.
6. As already mentioned, councils have a statutory obligation to provide adequate and efficient school education across their entire area. In addition, they have a responsibility to achieve Best Value, and to return effective performance indicator results to Audit Scotland including consideration to terms of occupancy rates and the value for money implications of under-occupancy.

About the guide and related documents

7. This guide is structured in 2 main parts:
 - A general context of School Estates Management, and a suggested overview of the process by which changes may be handled; and
 - A detailed Communications and Consultation Issues guide, which can be used as a discreet pull-out resource.
8. It has been produced by a Member/Officer working group and is intended to be a non-prescriptive document for councils, which allows them to dip in for helpful advice. It provides a general overview of school estates management, including key issues and suggested general good practice, as well as links to further information. It is hoped that this guide will be updated

systematically by COSLA in response to the changing demands on councils and further feedback/experiences over coming months/years.

9. This document is not intended as a definitive set of guidelines, and should be considered in conjunction with other key documents. The Scottish Executive's Website contains links to many of these: <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Education/School-Education/16238/13687>
10. This guide specifically compliments the Scottish Executive guidance on Local Authority Proposals for the School Estate issued by the Education Minister in September 2004, which sets out the roles and responsibilities of those involved in the process of considering proposals for changes to school estates, including the closure of schools. It acts as a framework, guide and clear reference point: <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Resource/Doc/1038/0005135.pdf>
11. In early 2003, the Scottish Executive and COSLA published a joint strategy for the school estate – *Building Our Future: Scotland's School Estate*. The purpose of the Strategy is to promote and ensure the creation of a learning and teaching environment fit for the future and buildings that will deliver better public services both to pupils and the wider community. It provides a national and coherent context for all the detailed strategic work at authority level.
12. The Strategy sets out a vision that every school should be an excellent school, raising aspirations, inspiring learners and teachers, enabling and supporting education, and making a positive contribution to local communities. It puts in place a framework within which to consider and plan the future investment in and improvement of the whole school estate, over the long term, to an extent which has never been done before.
13. The Scottish Executive Document, 'The 21st Century School' is aimed at local authorities and other stakeholders with an interest in creating a school estate suited to the needs of users. It recognises the importance of good school buildings in meeting a range of policy objectives and sets out cross cutting policies relevant to the school estate, It provides references to linked documents: <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2003/08/18007/25287>
14. Another document particularly worth noting is the Scottish Executive's Parent's Guide on School Closures, which will be available soon, and will contain information about councils' obligations, parent's rights and related legislative issues.
15. Finally, options for the way in which major school estates management programmes are funded have changed significantly in recent years. The advent of Public Private Partnerships (PPPs) offers the opportunity for the private and public sectors to become involved in relationships to deliver and maintain public sector assets and services. Further information is available from: <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Government/Finance/18232/12255>

What is School Estates Management and what do councils need to think about when making decisions about change?

16. No one disputes that young people deserve the best possible opportunities in life. Schools are a central part of this, and an integral part of the community. Councils need to develop their school estate in a way that ensures they can respond effectively to the challenges of the years ahead.
17. Councils need to meet these challenges within finite resources, and must use the resources available in a way that provides best value, yet also provides the optimum educational benefits.

18. Councils must also consider whether maintaining and improving the condition of certain school buildings is the most appropriate use of resources. It may be that alternative options provide more favourable long term educational benefits.
19. Ideally, any proposed change will be informed by a council's School Estate Management Plan, which will show how a council intends to maintain and improve its existing school buildings, costs, likely funding sources, and where schools should be located to best serve local communities. Because these are long-term plans, they should provide greater opportunity to ensure that councils have school buildings with high-quality facilities that are excellent places to learn for many years to come. In preparing these plans, councils will always want to consider the following questions:
- Is a school building suitable to accommodate changes in the way education is delivered or should other, more suitable, school buildings be considered?
 - Could a wider choice of subjects be offered in an alternative school?
 - Could an alternative option offer opportunities for pupils to be educated and to socialise with children of a similar age?
 - Are travel distances and times appropriate?
 - Has the number of children in an area increased or decreased, and what are the future pupil and population projections?
 - What are the financial implications, e.g.
 - What are the costs of the proposal?
 - What savings in running and maintaining schools will the proposal bring?
 - Are there any additional costs to consider?
 - Does the school provide an appropriate modern learning environment?
 - If school rolls have fallen below a certain level, are they likely to rise again?
20. Given the above factors, councils may need to consider a range of options as part of their School Estate Strategy, including school closures, amalgamations, new builds, or alternative additional uses for school buildings. Of these, the most contentious is likely to be a school closure.
21. Councils recognise that school closures are usually controversial, and such decisions are never taken lightly. If such decisions are part of a strategy of estate management, aimed at improving the overall quality of education provided, closure can be the most appropriate solution. The ultimate decision should always be based on sound evidence from a thorough consultation process to inform whether a school closure is the most appropriate educational option in the long-term. Reasons for a school closure could include:
- a building no longer being a suitable learning and teaching environment.
 - school rolls that have fallen below a certain level and are unlikely to rise again.
 - changes in the way education is delivered.
22. Avoiding the decision to close a school, in spite of sound evidence that it is the right thing to do, is likely to lead to greater problems in the future. Not only may this create a greater strain on available budgets, but also it may disadvantage some communities as others embrace the overall modernisation and improvement of education across the country.

What stages should a council follow before making school estate changes?

- **Vision** – Consider council's overall vision for Education across the area
- **Plan** – Consider School Estate Management Plan
- **Communication and Consultation**
- **Decision-making and Implementation**

Vision

23. Within a council's corporate vision, there will be a clear acknowledgement of the Council's responsibility to deliver quality education services. Councils have to be strong in setting this vision and sticking to it. This vision can become distorted by trying to react to immediate situations, and losing sight of the longer-term objectives. School closure situations are a good example of this, where the public/political pressure arising from opposition to a proposed closure can lead to the decision being delayed or overturned. If such proposals are overturned for anything other than sound reasons, the long-term vision of that council may ultimately be affected.

Good practice Example

Aberdeen City Council's 3Rs Project (Reorganise, Renovate, Rebuild) aims to regenerate Aberdeen's school estate to provide the highest quality learning environment across the city. They have developed a vision for the future of Aberdeen's school estate by involving staff away from just education professionals. By involving Community Learning and Development staff and Neighbourhood Community Planning Officers they also benefit from the involvement of staff trained and experienced in community engagement and who are closer to the community and more able to identify local issues and key community leaders and opinion formers.

For further details visit: http://www.aberdeencity.gov.uk/ACC_Data/information/edu_3rs.asp

Planning

24. Councils need to translate their vision into a meaningful plan. As discussed in paragraph 19, School Estate Management Plans (SEMPs) should outline strategic information about the future of school estates. They may also include strategic information about specific schools that is accessible for parents.

25. It is essential that the decision to close a school is based on sound evidence, and it is essentially the best option available in light of this evidence. It is worth talking to Planning colleagues and see if there is an alternative to closure arising from increased housebuilding or regeneration in an area. It is also worth bearing in mind the knock-on effect of the closure of primary schools on the secondary in that catchment area. Pulling away one/two primary schools to another high school can have a devastating effect on the previous one, particularly in terms of ensuring a social mix in each catchment area.

26. Of particular importance at the planning stage, is to consider the links with other planning and partnership structures. This should take the form of genuine engagement with the key existing local Community Planning partnership and associated forums.

27. Careful planning can assist councils and parents alike, and make proposals more understandable. This planning includes the formal preparation of plans, e.g. SEMPs, but also the planning of the process of developing proposals, consulting, and decision-making.

28. Councils may wish to adopt a phased approach which involves starting with schools with particularly poor quality accommodation or exceptionally low occupancy levels. Once success and trust is established, this could be rolled out to other areas. Careful asset management planning should assist with a phasing approach, and may vary depending on local circumstances.

29. More detailed information on SEMPs is available from the Scottish Executive web page mentioned in paragraph 9.

Good practice Example

Dumfries and Galloway Council have developed guidelines for the development of a School Review Group, whenever a school roll falls to 25 or when the total number of pupils in P1-4 is at 12 or less. The guidelines detail the cross section of parties to form the composition of the group and the group's key roles and responsibilities. It also outlines the key information and considerations that should be taken into account in deliberating the future of that school.

This ensures a consistent approach to school reviews, and also ensures that no school is subject to more than one review every 5 years. This forward planning approach provides a clear rationale for key decisions on a school estate.

Communications & Consultation

30. This section is one of the most important due to the need to inform stakeholders of changes or the need to change. These issues are discussed in detail in the attached Communications and Consultation Issues document, which builds largely on recent practical experiences. Councils' consultation obligations and parent's rights will be covered further in the Scottish Executive's forthcoming Parent's Guide.
31. One of the vital aspects of school estates management is the consultation which informs the ultimate decisions. Prior to undertaking the formal consultation exercise which is required by law before any school closure decision can be taken, many councils have found it helpful to undertake an informal consultation process. Such a process can allow a council to extend ownership of the decision making process to a comprehensive range of key stakeholders. It can be of enormous assistance, for example, in narrowing down the range of options available and, while it may lead to a formal proposal (or a series of options) on which statutory consultation will then take place, it can on occasion also lead to an alternative to school closure becoming the preferred option. It is not desirable to set out overly prescriptive guidelines on informal consultation but it is important for councils to flag up the status of any informal consultation exercises which they undertake, and to be clear to stakeholders about this. Whilst informal consultations will almost certainly not be capable of being used as a substitute for a formal consultation exercise they may well be helpful in preparing for a more meaningful formal consultation exercise if one is needed.
32. Formal consultation is required by law before any school closure decision can be taken by a council. Before any proposal to close a school can be adopted by a council, that proposal has to have formed the basis of a formal consultation exercise, as set out in The Education (Publication and Consultation Etc) (Scotland) Regulations 1981, as amended by SI 1987/2076 and SI 1989/1739.
33. If, after a statutory consultation exercise, a council decides to close a school then that decision may have to be referred to Scottish Ministers, depending on the circumstances (In the case of primary schools, if closure means that pupils would have to attend another primary school which is more than 5 miles away, for secondary schools more than 10 miles and - in all cases - if any of the schools affected are operating at 80% or more of their respective capacities. Also to be referred to Scottish Ministers would be any proposal which would mean that pupils currently attending a denominational school were unable to attend a school of that denomination).
34. Key Tips on both informal and formal consultation:
- Be clear about what you are consulting on
 - Be clear about what happens next

- Be clear about funding available and what is aspirational
- Be clear about what are short, medium and longer terms plans
- Be clear about the impact on existing pupils & future pupils
- Be clear about the impact on other users of the school now or in the future
- Use maps and diagrams

35. Finally, in all consultations, it is important that councils adopt a consistent and positive line throughout. If the council does not appear to believe in any aspect of what they're doing, there is little chance that an anxious or sceptical stakeholder will. This also means that council staff (including school-based staff) should be signed up to the programme and that they are not giving out a contradictory message to the council's vision.

Good Practice Example

Midlothian Council recently reviewed their school estate and it was clear to them that a programme was required to develop new buildings. It required the closure of more schools than the number of new schools being created. However, their phased consultation process helped to get the vast majority of stakeholders on board, enabling them to concentrate on making the process successful. They ran an extensive series of public meetings attended by most elected members and large numbers of the public, school boards, and church representatives. The outcome of the process was to alter the programme significantly, including the building of an additional school and a longer implementation period. These changes required a second consultation which was more of a paper exercise with meetings when requested. Councils should not underestimate the power of making stakeholders genuinely feel part of the decision-making process.

Decision Making & Implementation

36. If the evidence for changes to the school estate is sound, such as the educational case, the ultimate decision rests with the council. If the groundwork is done in the previous stages, and the council have adopted an effective Communications strategy, the actual decision may be more straight forward than earlier stages proved to be. This is still a crucial stage, and effective communication remains paramount throughout.

37. Implementation will require clear and comprehensive explanations to be offered about the proposals to be implemented, along with a clear timescale of the programme. Once again, it is crucial the key stakeholders are kept informed about the implementation stages.

Good Practice Example

West Lothian Council had a particular nursery school building that they simply could not afford to repair and sought to put the children into the local non-denominational/Roman Catholic primary school as nursery classes, where there was better quality accommodation. Despite concerns about the sectarian issue, a series of meetings with parents and groups allowed a joint appreciation of the community importance to develop, and a unified position to be accepted and jointly developed. The lesson was keep talking to people and focus on what is best for the children.

General Tips

Keep doing it – School Estate Management Planning has to be on-going and all stakeholders must get used to the idea that things do have to keep changing. Tough decisions that are supported by strong evidence need to be taken on an ongoing basis or schools will suffer from under investment.

Plan ahead – Councils need to have well thought out plans and, if possible, the capital resources to secure changes to the school estate.

Political support across a council is important, although consensus may be difficult to establish across a council. Also, MSPs (including List MSPs), MPs, and MEPs, are likely to take an interest and they should be briefed at an appropriate stage by the council.

Preparation of the necessary core strategies and management information. Have in place a policy for the removal of temporary units, removal of annexe buildings, standards of school space and accommodation, clear indications of how capital resources will be prioritised, etc.

Get agreement – Councils should develop an agreement between themselves and trade unions for staff affected by changes. This provides assurances for staff affected and keeps the unions involved in decisions. The ultimate effect of this action is that it makes it easier to engage with headteachers and allay any fears they have over their future.

Communication is key – Conduct thorough research and maintain links with the Administration Group, school boards, community councils, headteachers, etc.

Promote an objective view – Take the emotion out of the issue. Proposals have to take account of changing circumstances and the needs of the pupils in the future not the past. It is important to share all the facts openly, e.g. financial, educational, property issues, and planned housebuilding. Councils should also demonstrate the long-term educational benefits to the area, and remember that other facilities can offer the community role of the school.

Get parents on board – Consider whether the parents concerned will be affected, e.g. if a closure is for 5 years ahead? Do as much as possible to get the views of the wider audience of parents. Demonstrate that the council is listening, and ensure that all parents are fully aware of benefits from proposals

Involve school staff – Councils should explore ways of reassuring school staff about their careers (openings in new/other schools and of the educational benefits (visits to other schools who have been through a similar process). Staff should be fully involved in key stages of estate management planning. As employees of the council, they should be working towards the same goals as the council, but may find it difficult to support the council line if there exists a perceived threat to their career.

Explore alternatives to school closures – See if there is an alternative to closure, e.g. allocating more housebuilding or regeneration in an area.

Good Practice Example

Angus Council recently negotiated a successful merger of two rural primary schools, both of which were facing significant sustainability difficulties. A range of factors contributed to the success, including the transfer of existing staff and the continuity this provided for the children, and that community leaders could see considerably more advantages than disadvantages. Ultimately, from a situation where 2 schools faced closure, there is now a vibrant school with long term viability.

COSLA SCHOOL ESTATES MANAGEMENT GROUP

COMMUNICATIONS AND CONSULTATION ISSUES

1. INTRODUCTION

Falling school rolls combined with increased pressure on maintenance budgets mean that more and more councils across Scotland are having to embark on new and diverse strategies for School Estates Management.

In many, and indeed most instances, this will involve drawing up proposals and options that will see a rationalisation of school estates, including amalgamations, new builds, school closures or alternative additional uses for school buildings.

No matter how well thought-out, developed and presented a particular proposal, changes to school estates, and in particular any issues that involve the suggestion of school closures very rarely, if ever, gain universal approval from parents or from those living and working in the wider community. It is therefore crucial that councils give full consideration to all of the Communications issues likely to arise, including the essential element of Consultation.

As part of the wider Good Practice Guide, this paper sets out those various issues, and in doing so makes a number of suggestions about how councils can begin to prepare a communications strategy. However, this paper does not seek to provide a template that will fit each and every one of Scotland's 32 local authorities as the local circumstances will inevitably differ.

One thing will become apparent. Just as the actual implementation of any school estates strategy can be labour-intensive - particularly if the authority is trying to make a number of changes at the one time - so too can the delivery of an effective Communications Strategy. If a council considers that the in-house resources may be inadequate, then the introduction of outside consultants and/or additional temporary resources should be considered.

2. CONSULTATION – INFORMAL OR FORMAL

This may seem a peculiar heading given that councils have a statutory duty to consult in any circumstances when a school closure is on the table. But some authorities across Scotland have taken the route of informal consultations, or to be more precise, sounding exercises, which they embark upon prior to them finalising any proposals and proceeding to formal or statutory consultation.

Informal consultation

There are a number of different ways that informal consultation can be carried out, and equally, there are a number of different issues which may benefit from a period of informal consultation.

One such issue is the publication of any School Estates Management Plan (SEMP), and a period of informal consultation could be invaluable.

A fully comprehensive SEMP will identify just how much in the way of resources are required to create schools that are fit for purpose in the 21st Century. It is more difficult to set out precisely how long it will take to fully deliver the SEMP; councils must take difficult decisions on how best to raise the required resources, taking into account whether any special funding is available from

Executive initiatives or whether it will choose to take a particular approach such as PPP and/or via the prudential borrowing framework.

A SEMP will indicate the short, medium and long-term future for individual schools; inevitably, it will contain proposals for change, some of which may include closure. By seeking comments and observations on a SEMP, councils can gauge community feeling before firming up on any formal proposals.

But informal consultations do not have to be restricted to the publication of a SEMP. A council may wish to present a series of options for change as part of its longer-term plans for school estates management. For example, if a number of sites are available for a new-build school within a community, it might be worth having an informal consultation. Or, if a council is thinking about amalgamating a number of existing services under one roof within a single campus– for instance pre-5 facilities, facilities for additional support needs and primary education – again it might be worth taking informal soundings from within the community before a more formal consultation is undertaken.

There is a potential downside to any informal consultation in that communities might perceive that what is being sounded-out is not an option but a fait accompli. This is more likely to be the case if the informal consultation is surrounding a possible closure.

There are a number of key points that councils have to bear in mind when embarking on any informal consultation or soundings: -

- be clear about what you are consulting on, and preferably offer more than one option for consideration
- ensure that communities are aware of any funding issues surrounding the options; in other words set out clearly what you have funding for and what, at the time of the informal consultation, is merely aspirational
- ensure that everyone is aware that the results of any informal consultation will not lead to any binding council decision

It will always be for each council to determine whether any sounding exercise or informal consultation will be of any assistance in developing plans for dealing with school estates management – or if proposals were considered ready to go straight to the statutory process. But either way, it is essential that the council consult in a way that is meaningful, easily understood and transparent. The methods and means of communication must be applied consistently in all circumstances.

Formal (Statutory) Consultation

Before any proposal to close a school can be adopted by a Council, that proposal has to have formed the basis of a formal consultation exercise.

3. FROM THE OUTSET.....INITIAL INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATIONS

No matter whether the process is formal or informal, there are a number of key groups with whom the council will need to communicate from the outset: -

- Parents (including school boards)
- teachers
- media
- other interested parties and stakeholders (including MSPs & MPs)

NB : It must be remembered that within any formal process, there are certain statutory consultees - parents (individually) and school boards and churches (collectively).

In an ideal world, every one of the key groups outlined above would receive any initial information about school estates management issues simultaneously. But that is an unrealistic expectation, and no communications strategy can deliver such a scenario. Nevertheless, it is important to attempt to manage the issuing of information in such a way that none of the key groups feel excluded from the process. It is also essential that none of the key groups be given cause to be critical of the process being followed by the authority.

What follows are suggestions on how to try and manage the different communications issues as they affect the various key groups. Given that the councils operate in a political arena, it is more often than not that the media find themselves in a position where they learn of the proposals in advance; as such this paper will now focus on a media strategy as part of a wider communications strategy. Furthermore, by involving the media at the earliest possible stage, a balanced view that accurately reflects the educational case for change can be more effectively presented.

4. MEDIA POSITIONS

All media outlets thrive on fresh and preferably controversial news that stimulates debate/discussion/disagreement. The future viability of a school building will clearly be of interest.

From an early stage, the media – in particular the local press (and radio stations if applicable) – are likely to adopt a position from which experience shows they will rarely deviate throughout the process.

In an ideal world, having the local media from the outset give its wholehearted support to a council's proposals is the ideal position. Again, experience shows this will rarely be the case, but the chances of it happening will increase if a council has a transparent and honest approach to the exercise, starting with an early and full appraisal of the proposals.

The best that many councils can realistically hope to achieve is a neutral position from the local media. In such a case, the media will report what it is the council wants to do while outlining, with no greater prominence, the views of those who are opposed. Editorials will usually simply suggest that the council has the right to make its case but that the members must listen carefully to the views of parents and those in the community before making their minds up.

The worst case scenario is to have the local media immediately take issue with the council's proposals and to then allow themselves to become a platform solely for parents or groups opposed to change. There can be any multitude of reasons as to why the media can adopt a hostile position. It is often related to the fact that a school closure issue is a strong story that can increase sales, and editors/reporters will be keen to pursue as many angles as possible. The council is likely to have just one position; but out in the community, there will be a myriad of tales that parents can tell.

5. MAKING CONTACT WITH THE MEDIA: THE LEAD-UP

There is one thing that all councils will be able to control in the media handling of school closures - the initial announcement - and this is probably the single most important aspect of any media strategy.

Again, it is impossible to provide a template that will fit every single council as political and administrative management arrangements differ across Scotland.

However, there are common factors, namely that the initial message has to be robust, honest and credible. It also has to be communicated in such a way that it is easily understood and contains all relevant information. It has to be delivered with authority. It also has to be delivered at the earliest possible opportunity.

All of the groundwork has to be done well in advance. The Head of Media (or equivalent) must be brought in at an early stage and discuss with the Director of Education (or equivalent), the likely timetable and sequence of events.

This includes how the matter will be handled politically in advance of any report being debated in public at Committee. It would also be beneficial if the Head of Media was able to discuss - with the Council Leader and/or the Convener of Education - the anticipated political impact of the proposals.

The involvement of the media professionals at the earliest possible stage allows a greater understanding of all the issues likely to arise. This will be invaluable in allowing the Head of Media to prepare a detailed strategy with a completely thorough brief.

6. MAKING CONTACT WITH THE MEDIA - TIMING

The discussions between politicians and education officials will have to identify and map-out a critical path – especially in terms of when the proposals are to be made public.

Once there is an agreement to make a proposal public (e.g. by submitting a report to a particular Committee meeting), there must also be a further agreement on when precisely the information should be given to the media.

Once again, with councils having different political and administrative management procedures, there is no single prescriptive suggestion on offer. However, the media should be briefed at the very earliest opportunity after there is a final 'sign-off' on the contents of any firm proposal going into the public domain. Ideally, a media briefing should take place within 24 hours of this final agreement.

7. MAKING CONTACT WITH THE MEDIA – CONTENT

Given the need to have a briefing within 24 hours of the 'sign-off', a decision will have to be taken to determine whether media outlets should be given advance notice or if it should be a last-minute phone-round. The former is preferable - newsdesks can actively plan to cover an event if they have advance notice of timings and thus there is a greater likelihood of coverage.

But no matter how and when the media is advised of the timing of any briefing, there is a major task to be undertaken in terms of preparation – as much information as possible must be gathered together to issue to any journalists who turn up for the briefing.

This should involve putting together a press pack, consisting of: -

- a short press release, containing a summary of the proposals, together with a statement from the politician who is leading on the issue
- a detailed background note, outlining the overall details, together with a breakdown of each individual proposal; this should also contain the financial details as well as, where appropriate,

a summary of what the proposals will mean in terms of school provision across the whole local authority area.

- if applicable, a further background note summarising the outcome of any previous programmes of closures

This should be given to the journalists as and when they arrive for the briefing, just in advance of them being addressed by the lead politician and Director of Education.

In addition, the lead politician and Director should make themselves available for one-to-one interviews immediately afterwards. (see section 11 below)

The details in the Press Pack, as well as the statements given at the media briefing will shape the initial opinions that a media outlet will take on the matter. The more open and direct the material is on the day, then the greater likelihood of the council gaining some level of support from the local media.

It is also suggested that during the media briefing, the lead politician and Director of Education advise of how the authority intends to make the other key groups aware of the proposals – in particular parents and teachers (see sections 8 & 9 below).

8. COMMUNICATING WITH HEAD TEACHERS AND STAFF

There is nothing to prevent a council passing on advance information to staff at the schools in question.

It is recommended that the Director of Education arrange for one of her/his senior staff to simultaneously advise all affected Head Teachers at the time the media briefing is being held. It is suggested that this be done on a face-to-face basis. The opportunity should be taken to brief the Head Teachers on the overall aims of the council proposal as well as the rationale behind each proposal.

If possible, teachers should be given assurances or guarantees on all job issues, for teaching, janitorial and other support staff. It may also be worth considering giving each Head Teacher a copy of the Press Pack as this will contain all of the information that the council has put into the public domain in respect of the proposed closure.

Head Teachers should also be reminded that they should refrain from talking to the media on any of the proposals and that all calls should be referred to the Press Office.

9. COMMUNICATING AND CONSULTING WITH PARENTS

Effective communication and meaningful consultation with parents and school boards is essential.

Any authority that has already been down the road of change, particularly if it involves proposed school closures, will know that many parents will react with shock and anger.

Emotional reaction from parents is a key obstacle, and councils need to combat the initial 'gut-reaction' that often follows the first mention of school closures. Councils must focus on the educational case for change – the objective of any proposals will not be a school closure in itself but rather an improvement in the educational provision for all pupils.

Once the council is in the position to begin the statutory process of consulting with parents, it is crucial that this is carried out in as concise and clear a fashion as possible.

The key aspect of communicating with parents will be the initial letter sent out by the council which should be issued as quickly as possible after the Committee decision is taken to go out to consultation – ideally the next working day (if practicable). It should as far as possible, be jargon-free and contain easily understood language. As well as containing the actual consultation documents, it should outline how the process will work (including the timescales involved) as well as any arrangements for a local early public meeting. If the council is extending its public consultation beyond the statutory period, then this should be made clear.

Ideally, the letter should also indicate who exactly will be present at the local public meeting on behalf of the authority.

It should also be borne in mind that while consultation with parents is statutory, no parent is duty-bound to respond to the council's proposals. It may therefore be worth giving consideration to devising a pro-forma questionnaire or response sheet for inclusion alongside the letter in an effort to encourage responses from parents. The use of such a pro-forma will not only lead to an increase in responses, but help a council rise above any potential criticisms that relying only on written submissions may potentially put some potential respondents at a disadvantage.

The role and position of School Boards and Parent Councils must also be taken into account, and consideration should be given to inviting key members of these bodies to a separate meeting with education officials.

If a council has already implemented changes to its school estates, then the outcomes should be used as part of the information provided to parents. If new or improved facilities have been constructed, then parents should be offered the opportunity to see the contrast between new and old schools at first hand.

Other proven successful means of consultation have been online forums whereby parents (and other interested parties) can ask direct questions of the council, over and above the opportunity provided by any public meetings. Councils may also wish to have any proposals discussed locally, for example at Area Committees or other similar type bodies recognised by the authority.

Some councils have found it helpful to involve voluntary organisations in their consultation exercises (e.g. Parent to Parent) as such bodies are seen as providing an independent view.

There is clearly a wide menu of choices open to councils in terms of consulting with parents, not all of which are applicable across the country. But whatever options are chosen, councils must embark on formal consultation that is meaningful and which allows parents (and other stakeholders) to be involved.

10. COMMUNICATING AND CONSULTING WITH OTHER INTERESTED PARTIES

It is impossible to determine every possible 'other interested parties' within a consultation exercise.

As noted above, it is only parents of affected pupils who must be involved, along with the school board of any affected school and the church if a Roman Catholic School is affected.

There will be interest expressed in the proposals from local MP, MSPs (including list members) and even MEPs (all of whom are list members for the Scotland constituency). There may very well be active community councils.

It might be prudent for an authority to draw up a list of potential interested individuals and groups and issue them with a copy of the consultation document along with the pro-forma.

Notices of all the public meetings should be placed through paid-for advertising in the local press - and all relevant documentation should be placed in public libraries and other council buildings (e.g. Area Offices) for inspection. The council's website could also be used to provide general information, as well as permitting the electronic downloading and printing of all documentation, including the consultation documents and pro-formas.

By providing all relevant information in as many forms as possible will allow the council to defend itself against any accusation that the consultation process was somehow limited, insufficient or otherwise flawed.

11. FOLLOW-UP MEDIA ENQUIRIES

In addition to making the lead politician and Director available for one-to-one interviews immediately after the initial media briefing (as detailed earlier in section 7), the council must also be prepared to co-operate as far as is practically possible with any reasonable media requests. This could involve allowing access to some of the affected schools and also to any schools which have been part of any earlier proposals. If a TV crew is covering the story and want to do a live feed – make the necessary arrangements.

It is possible that some media outlets will not come along to the briefing but pick up on the story afterwards. In this case, it is important that the press pack is supplied and that the Head of Media gives as full and detailed a briefing as required. If however, the Head of Media judges that the fresh enquiry merits some sort of interview with the lead politician/Director, then this should be facilitated rather than trying to argue that the journalist should have come to the initial briefing.

12. COMMUNICATING WITH THE MEDIA ONCE A COUNCIL GOES OUT TO FORMAL CONSULTATION

Once the authority has taken a formal decision, a press release must be issued.

The initial media briefing will already have gone into great detail, and the media release for that event will have included quotes from the lead politician and Director. As such, the media release announcing that a formal consultation is to be embarked upon should stick merely to the facts and offer just a summary of the proposals and an outline of the timetable.

Having earlier provided a full and detailed briefing, and then having issued a statement detailing the timetable for the consultation process, the council can then legitimately adopt a standard line for the full duration of the formal consultation process, such as: -

“The council has made a proposal for xx school which would see it (close/merge with...), and this is currently the subject of a detailed public consultation exercise. We encourage everyone with an interest in the proposal to give his or her views in writing by (insert date). The final decision on the matter is expected to be taken in (insert date)”

It is important that this line be maintained throughout the consultation process. It is likely that parents (and politicians) opposed to the proposal will mount campaigns, part of which will inevitably involve them making their case to the local media.

It is suggested however, that if anyone opposed to change makes a patently false claims as part of their case, the council should respond with the facts of the matter. For instance – if, on the

issue of road safety, an opponent states wrongly that the site of a new school is at a location where there have been a number of fatal accidents, the council must put the record straight with a statement of rebuttal.

13. DEALING WITH THE OUTCOME OF THE CONSULTATION EXERCISE

The final decision will be taken at a Committee meeting at which the public can attend.

The council can make no official statement until that meeting has concluded.

The situation will also be complicated by the fact that councils have a legal requirement to publish all papers in advance of the actual meeting. Such papers will contain recommendations and it is almost certain that media outlets will run headline stories prior to elected members meeting to take the final decision.

It must be emphasised that the Head of Media cannot respond in any other way other than to confirm the date of the meeting when the final decision is to be taken – anything else can be interpreted as pre-empting a democratic decision and could have legal consequences.

The recommended course of action is to arrange a formal press conference immediately after the conclusion of the meeting dealing with the closures, at which a pre-prepared media statement should be handed out. The lead politician and Director of Education should address the gathered press corps, say a few words about how the process has been handled referring to some of the issues that have arisen along the way, and then invite questions.

It could actually be that if the media come in numbers to the committee meeting that is taking the final decision, and get enough quotes from what is said during the debates, there will be no need for any formal press conference. But it is still useful to have the lead politician and/or Director lined-up for any interviews afterwards – particularly with radio and TV who will not have been allowed to record the actual meeting.

The conclusion of the press conference and any subsequent TV/radio interviews should be the end of any dealings with the media on a particular round of school closures. Any outlet that comes along afterwards should simply be given a copy of the media statement – there is no need to have the lead politician/Director subjected to further questioning. After all, the final decision has now been taken and the issue is done and dusted. Until the next time...