



EDUCATION & CHILDREN'S SERVICES

APPENDIX 1

**CONSULTATION REPORT REGARDING
THE CLOSURE OF EASTERFIELD SCHOOL**

JUNE 2024

**This Consultation Report has been issued by
Education & Children's Services of Aberdeenshire Council in
accordance with the Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010**

**If you have difficulty reading this document please contact
Learning Estates Team on 01771 676600
or LearningEstates@aberdeenshire.gov.uk**

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1 Introduction

- 1.1 This report has been prepared following a consultation on the proposal to discontinue education at Easterfield School, which is currently mothballed and re-assign its catchment area to either Auchterless School or Turriff Primary School.
- 1.2 This report has been prepared in accordance with the Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010 on the above proposal. The objective of this report is to:
- Provide a record of the total number and a summary of written and oral responses received during the statutory consultation period;
 - Provide a statement of the Council's response to those written and oral representations;
 - Provide the full text of Education Scotland's report and a statement of the Council's response to this report;
 - Provide a statement on how the Council reviewed the above proposal following the representations received during the statutory consultation period and the report from Education Scotland;
 - Provide details of any omission from, or inaccuracy in, the proposal document and state how the Council acted on it;
 - State how the Council has obeyed Section 9(1) and 11A to 13 of the Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010 when reviewing the above proposal;
 - Provide Officers' conclusions and recommendation.

2 The Consultation Process

- 2.1 The requirement for consulting on a relevant proposal relating to schools is set out in the Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010.
- 2.2 At its meeting on 1 February 2024 Education and Children's Services Committee authorised the launch of a statutory consultation regarding the closure of Easterfield School.
- 2.3 The proposal document made clear to consultees that the consultation period would run from 5 February 2024 until 29 March 2024. This adequately covered the required minimum of 30 days term time consultation.
- 2.4 On 5 February 2024 copies of the proposal document were distributed to:
- Parent Council of Auchterless School and Turriff Primary School
 - Parents of pupils at Auchterless School and Turriff Primary School
 - Pupils at Auchterless School and Turriff Primary School
 - Parents of pre-school age children living within the Easterfield School catchment area
 - Staff at Auchterless School and Turriff Primary School

- Trade union representatives of Auchterless School and Turriff Primary School staff
 - Auchterless, Inverkeithny and Fisherford Community Council
 - Local Early Years Partner Providers
 - Easterfield School catchment residents
 - Regular users of Auchterless School and Turriff Primary School
 - Education Scotland
- 2.5 The consultation proposal was posted to all residents of the Easterfield School catchment area and emailed to all other consultees. Paper copies were posted where the Council received a delivery failure notification from the email address provided.
- 2.6 Auchterless and Turriff Primary Schools were provided with spare copies of the proposal, along with maps and a launch poster which contained information on the public meeting and how to complete the online survey.
- 2.7 Turriff Library, Turriff Sports Centre, Turriff Swimming Pool and Formartine Area Office were provided with spare copies of the proposal and the poster to be displayed at their establishments during the consultation period.
- 2.8 Local Early Years Partner Providers were provided with a copy of the proposal to be distributed to their parents/carers and the poster to be displayed at their setting during the consultation period.
- 2.9 A copy of the launch poster was distributed to be displayed in a window at Easterfield School during the consultation period.
- 2.10 The proposal document was also published on the Council website: <http://www.aberdeenshire.gov.uk/schools/education-consultations/> and a copy of the document was available on request from the Aberdeenshire Council's Learning Estates Team.
- 2.11 An online survey through the Engage Aberdeenshire platform was available throughout the consultation period.
- 2.12 In addition, relevant information was published on the Engage Aberdeenshire project page. Communication regarding the consultation and public meeting was published on the Council's website and Facebook. The consultation was widely publicised in various online media, such as The Scotsman, Medriva, Grampian Online and BBC News.
- 2.13 The consultation was also advertised in Press and Journal on 27 February 2024 and it included details of the public meeting.
- 2.14 A public consultation meeting was held on 5 March 2024 at 6.00 pm at Turriff

Primary School.

- 2.15 The consultees were given the option to submit their comments on the proposal via email to LearningEstates@aberdeenshire.gov.uk or posted to: Learning Estates Team, Gordon House, Blackhall Road, Inverurie, AB51 3WA.
- 2.16 Education Scotland received a copy of the proposal document and attended the public meeting. At the end of the consultation period, they were sent all written representations received by the Council. HM Inspectors then held meetings with Easterfield School, Auchterless School, Turriff Primary Schools and Turriff Academy's relevant consultees as well as with Auchterless, Inverkeithny & Fisherford Community Council. Following their involvement, Education Scotland prepared a report on the educational aspects of the proposal. This aspect is covered in more detail under Section 8 of this report.
- 2.17 In line with the statutory requirement, this consultation report will be published on the Aberdeenshire Council's website on 4 June 2024, exactly one week prior to the Formartine Area Committee and more than three weeks prior to the Council taking the decision on whether to implement the proposal.
<http://www.aberdeenshire.gov.uk/schools/education-consultations/>

3 The Proposal

- 3.1 The proposal document included as Appendix A to this report, was issued to those individuals and bodies listed under 'Distribution' within the proposal document. The proposal document was also published on the Council website: <http://www.aberdeenshire.gov.uk/schools/education-consultations/>
- 3.2 The schools affected by this proposal are:
- Easterfield School
 - Auchterless School
 - Turriff Primary School
- 3.3 The proposal on which the consultation took place was:
- To discontinue education at Easterfield School, which is currently mothballed, and re-assign its catchment area to either Auchterless School or Turriff Primary School.***
- 3.4 The proposal document gave two options for realigning the Easterfield catchment area either in full to Auchterless School or in full to Turriff Primary School. Five further options for realigning the catchment were discounted, and two alternatives to closure were identified as being to reopen the school or for Easterfield to remain mothballed.
- 3.5 The proposal document stated that the Easterfield School catchment area would be reassigned to one of the neighbouring primary schools: Auchterless

School or Turriff Primary School.

- 3.6 The proposed changes, if approved, would take place immediately after the conclusion of the statutory process relating to school closures.
- 3.7 All existing primary age pupils living within the Easterfield School catchment would continue their education at the schools they are currently attending. Any siblings of those current pupils would be able to join their brother/sister(s) at the same school.
- 3.8 The proposal document confirmed that all pupils within the Easterfield catchment area would be entitled to school transport should they choose to attend the designated school.
- 3.9 If Easterfield School was to be permanently closed, then there would be no requirement for the building to continue as a school. Education and Children's Services would declare the building surplus to requirement.
- 3.10 The options appraisal process has identified a number of alternative uses for the school and Aberdeenshire Council would be happy to work with the local community to see whether the school building could be suitable for community use. This would have to be fully assessed following the Asset Disposal Policy and subject to a Community Asset Transfer Application.
- 3.11 There will not be any staffing implications relating to the proposal if implemented.

4 Educational Benefits Statement

- 4.1 The Proposal document contains within it an educational benefits statement. This statement is replicated here for reference.
- 4.2 That statement drew upon the current positive educational experiences that pupils living within the catchment area are having at other local schools. These are in contrast to the experiences that would be available with a roll of fewer than five pupils, should parents wish to enrol their children at Easterfield School again.
- 4.3 Educational benefits are considered below for pupils if either of the identified options is adopted.
- 4.4 If Easterfield School was to re-open, with a reduced number of pupils over a greater age range, there would be increased challenges in ensuring that all children develop the four capacities of Successful Learners, Confident Individuals, Responsible Citizens and Effective Contributors.
- 4.5 A small school roll made up of one or a few year groups significantly diminishes

the sustainability and viability of a school and offers fewer opportunities to learners which results in a negative impact on their educational and social development.

- 4.6 There are real concerns that pupils' educational development may not be as successful as it could be if opportunities to work closely, regularly and frequently with peers of the same age are limited.
- 4.7 Isolation for some pupils, due to no connection with peers of the same age or gender in a school with an extremely small roll may have a negative impact on their social development.
- 4.8 The proposal would provide improved opportunities for children to develop skills for learning, life and work e.g., increasing opportunities for working with others of a similar age and stage which are very limited in schools of less than eight children in a multi-composite setting.
- 4.9 While it may seem that having fewer pupils in a class would allow a teacher to provide more one-on-one attention, in this case fewer means limited pupils' learning experiences. Classes low in pupil numbers have disadvantages, which are further compounded when a school has a single class, potentially with only one or two children at each year stage.
- 4.10 While one or two pupils absent from a large class is not a major issue, a small number of absent pupils can make a significant difference in a small class. If there are only eight pupils in a class, two missing pupils represent a much larger percentage of the class population, making it more difficult for the teacher to continue with planned lessons.
- 4.11 This will significantly impact the class dynamics and learning experiences of children in the single class setting, with the likely consequence that a child may be the only pupil at a particular stage. Thereby having no other pupil to share their learning experience with and benefit from those interactions.
- 4.12 A smaller class is less likely to represent a diverse cross section of society. Pupils benefit from being members of diverse classes because they have the opportunity to hear viewpoints that differ greatly from their own. While some small classes do have a diverse array of members, many are relatively homogeneous in nature and, as such, do not offer pupils the opportunity to learn in a diverse setting.
- 4.13 Some academic activities require a minimum number of participants. Activities such as small group projects, group discussions or peer to peer learning activities are much harder to implement in a small class because there are fewer pupils to divide into groups, limiting pupils' options. Other options, such as large-scale games, may be impossible in single small settings because there

are not enough pupils to allow for game play, or due to the wide variation in the age and physical development of the pupils, potentially making an activity unsafe.

- 4.14 Some pupils enjoy the anonymity associated with being a member of a larger class and school. These pupils are uncomfortable in the spotlight and prefer to blend in with the crowd as they move through the process of learning. For pupils of this nature, small classes are far from desirable because in educational settings with reduced pupil numbers, they do not have the same opportunity to mix with their peer group.
- 4.15 The level to which pupils are able to become skilled in social interaction will depend to an extent on the opportunities afforded to them. The forging of close friendships and the development of self-esteem is enhanced by each pupil being enabled to be part of an age-appropriate peer group of a sufficient size to allow a range of interactions and relationships to form.
- 4.16 Working with others across a wide range of settings is one of the core elements of the modern school curriculum. This includes planning and carrying out projects in small groups, sharing tasks and responsibilities, and being ready and willing to learn from and with others. Auchterless and Turriff Primary Schools have sufficient pupils to allow the children to work collaboratively on various topics and activities. The class teachers will work with both individuals and groups at each stage of the curriculum, and group working allows pupils to develop different skills from those that are developed during individual work.
- 4.17 Within larger schools, pupils will have the opportunity to develop wider relationships and friendships which will see them better prepared to meet the social and learning opportunities and challenges ahead in the context of a secondary school with a roll of around 650 pupils. This is important in terms of developing their education through their school journey.
- 4.18 Working with others also plays a part in the development of leadership skills, which become increasingly important to pupils as they move through their school years and beyond school education into adulthood.
- 4.19 Pupils at both Auchterless and Turriff Primary Schools regularly work in cooperative learning groups. A cooperative learning strategy normally involves four pupils of roughly the same age group working together collaboratively. If Easterfield School re-opened with a low roll that would mean that the groups would not only be limited in size but also static and there would be no possibility of changing the membership of learning groups. The pupils may not be of a similar age and could be spread across P1-P7. A low roll would further limit the variety of skills that pupils could bring to the groups, and there would be a smaller range of work to use in terms of sharing standards.

- 4.20 A larger school roll offers children from the Easterfield School catchment area an increased possibility of participating in teams in a range of games. These educational, cultural and sporting activities provide a number of benefits for children in terms of both academic and social development and support the process of transition towards the larger and more varied educational setting of a secondary school.
- 4.21 Pupils at Auchterless and Turriff Primary Schools can participate in various activities and events across the year. Auchterless School holds Treasure Island, Christmas Singalong, Nativity, Auchterless Has Got Talent, Christmas Fayre; and also community cafes, sports day, theatre visits, P7 trips, class trips and whole school fun day. Turriff Primary School has Café, pupils learning presentations, Instrumental Music Service music performance, open school curricular events, Church Services, sports days, prize giving, and charity and awareness raising events.
- 4.22 An increased roll gives pupils the opportunity to participate in a range of groups, such as Pupil Council, House Captains, Rights Respecting Schools, Eco-Committee, a buddy system and playground leaders. Auchterless School offers pupils the opportunity to be on pupil voice sessions, crews and eco groups, 'Rights Respecting Schools Award' group and art club. Turriff Primary School offers pupils the following opportunities to participate in buddies, Young Leaders, Pupil Council, Junior Road Safety Officers, House and Vice Captains, Eco Committee, DYW group, Rotakids and Communication Group.
- 4.23 Turriff Primary School co-operates with Turriff United, AFCCT, Turriff Rugby club, street dance, yoga and relax kids on an ad hoc basis throughout the year. Pupils can compete in inter-school level competitions such as badminton and netball. The school works with all Turriff Cluster schools to bring visitors to the area to share resources and costs such as a travelling theatre group. With Turriff Academy, Turriff Primary is involved in organising work experience events, such as Foundation Apprenticeships and Growing 2Gether this session.
- 4.24 Some of the educational benefits arise not from larger pupil numbers (e.g. to form teams of similar age and size), but also because a larger staff and parent body increases the likelihood of interested adults leading a range of activities.
- 4.25 Auchterless School regularly cooperates on a staff level with King Edward, Crudie and Fintry Schools, and staff of Turriff Primary, Monquhitter and Fyvie Schools meet each term as part of their working Time Agreement to attend 'sharing standards' meetings.
- 4.26 Both Auchterless and Turriff Primary Schools have Parent Councils that support learning, teaching, school improvement, and parental and community engagement. Turriff Primary School organises Coffee, Cake, Curriculum and Chat sessions for parents termly and provides opportunities for parent helpers

on trips, outdoor learning, baking and cycling. If Easterfield School were to re-open there would be an opportunity for a Parent Council to operate; however, with a small pupil cohort, there would be a smaller number of families to participate resulting in a greater reliance on individuals to support the school.

- 4.27 Auchterless School has a vegetable garden, orchard and mud kitchen, organises trip trails and makes use of the community for learning opportunities, such as churchyard and walks. Pupils at Turriff Primary School can use a sensory garden and a community garden, mud kitchens, astro, grassy field, climbing frame and free standing musical instruments at the playground. The school also makes use of Delgaty Woods and the Den in Turriff for walks.
- 4.28 It is Aberdeenshire Council's view that the pupils from the Easterfield School catchment derive educational benefits from their current attendance at the larger neighbouring schools. Formalising the current arrangements would provide several such benefits, judged against both the Aberdeenshire and National criteria set out above.
- 4.29 The vast majority of pupils from the Easterfield catchment area currently attend other schools in the Turriff Cluster. No adverse effects for those pupils are expected to arise from the permanent closure of Easterfield School.

5 Public Engagement

5.1 Public Meetings

All parents/carers, community members and stakeholders were invited to the public meeting to discuss the proposal, which was scheduled to be held at Turriff Primary School on 5 March 2024 at 6.00 pm.

During the week commencing 26 February 2024, the public meeting was advertised in Press & Journal and on Aberdeenshire Council's social media.

The meeting was attended by Council officers, elected members and an Education Scotland representative. However, no members of the public attended the meeting.

A note of the meeting is attached as Appendix C.

5.2 Online Survey

During the consultation period parents/carers, community members and stakeholders were invited to take part in the online survey to express their opinion on the proposal.

The survey provided a summary of the proposal and the identified options. Participants were also given the opportunity to leave comments regarding the proposal.

Out of the 17 survey participants, seven (41%) were parents/carers, nine (53%) were staff members and one was a community member. The survey revealed that 11 (65%) respondents favoured the closure of Easterfield School, while four (24%) opposed it, and two (12%) had no preference. Regarding proposed options, 11 (65%) supported Option 1 (closing Easterfield School and merging with Auchterless School), while two (12%) favoured Option 2 (closing Easterfield School and merging with Turriff Primary School). Three (18%) participants believed none of the proposed options were suitable and one had no preference.

The summary of submitted feedback has been provided in Appendix D.

It is not appropriate to share the full transcript of responses, as some responses could identify respondents. The responses have been redacted to prevent the identification of any individuals and have also been appended to this report as Appendix E.

5.3 Discussion with Pupils

As part of the consultation process, Head Teachers at Auchterless School and Turriff Primary School discussed the proposal regarding the closure of Easterfield School and re-assigning its catchment to either Auchterless or Turriff Primary.

In general, pupils from both schools welcomed the proposal and had no objections to Easterfield children joining their school. Children identified a range of potential advantages and disadvantages associated with both small and bigger schools.

Full details of feedback received from both schools have been provided in Appendices F & G.

5.4 Staff Engagement

As Easterfield School has been mothballed since August 2021, all staff previously based at Easterfield School have been employed at other establishments and some are no longer employed by Aberdeenshire Council. Staff within Auchterless and Turriff Primary Schools have been given the opportunity to discuss the proposal and provided their feedback through the online survey. Of the nine staff members who completed the survey, the vast majority support the proposal to close Easterfield School and merge it with Auchterless School.

6 Written Responses

- 6.1 During the consultation period between 5 February 2024 and 29 March 2024, representations were invited from statutory consultees and interested parties. No written comments to the consultation were received.

7 Education Authority Response to Written and Oral Representations

- 7.1 Comments received during the consultation period have been carefully considered and the Council response is provided below:

- 7.2 *If Option 1 is implemented siblings of pupils currently enrolled at Turriff Primary School will not be provided with school transport to Turriff Primary.*

When Easterfield School was mothballed, pupils from the school were offered a place at either Auchterless, Forgue, Largue or Turriff Primary Schools. Any siblings of those pupils enrolled at one of the designated schools will be able to join their brother/sister(s) at the same school and home-to-school transport will be provided.

- 7.3 *Parents of pupils zoned for the Easterfield School catchment area should be able to choose where they want their children to attend following the closure; Closing Easterfield is a loss to the community providing a choice for parents where and how to educate their children.*

Creating a dual zone would be against the Aberdeenshire Council Learning Estates Strategy, which states that no new dual catchment areas will be created due to additional transport costs and vehicles, increase in vehicle emissions as well as difficulties in the planning of school places and staffing for secondary schools.

Permanent closure of Easterfield School will not deny parents/carers their right under the 1981 Parents' Charter to submit a Placing Request for a school they prefer, instead of the school assigned to the local catchment area where they reside.

- 7.4 *Easterfield School should not be closed; The number of pupils was up; Easterfield School should remain open.*

The Council's position is that these elements have been thoroughly assessed and are explained in Sections 3, 9 and 10 of the Proposal Document and Section 5 of the Options Appraisal document, where comprehensive analyses are provided to address any issues and concerns.

- 7.5 *Easterfield School was mothballed without proper notice and justification.*

In May 2021, it was evident that Easterfield School's enrolment for the 2022 session would drop to eight pupils. Following discussions with Ward Members, the Director of Education & Children's Services decided to temporarily mothball the school from August 2021.

The decision to mothball a school is an operational one that has been delegated to the Director of Education and Children's Services and is not subject to the Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010.

Meetings were held on 27 May 2021, with staff and parents to communicate this decision, including plans for staff relocation and alternative school options for pupils, such as Auchterless, Forgue, Largue or Turriff Primary Schools.

Individual meetings with parents took place on 1 June 2021, to address personal circumstances.

Following consultations, all pupils were successfully placed in Auchterless and Turriff Primary Schools, and staff were relocated accordingly.

7.6 *Easterfield provides an alternative education to the larger schools and provides choice rather than a one-size-fits-all approach.*

Aberdeenshire Council recognises the importance and value of small rural schools. Auchterless School has been suggested as an option on the basis that it is a small rural school.

With Easterfield school having eight or fewer pupils, it is deemed to have a negative impact on children's educational and social development and wellbeing.

The Council's position has been fully set out in the Educational Benefits Statement, replicated in Section 4 of this report.

7.7 *Easterfield School resources should be distributed across the cluster to save money.*

The Council is determined to ensure that learning estate become more sustainable and that negative impact on the environment is reduced. This includes a commitment to the circular economy of reusing surplus resources, equipment and furniture wherever possible.

If a decision is made to permanently close the school, schools will be approached to express an interest in the furniture, equipment and resources in the first instance. Options for distribution to community groups would then be explored as a second stage.

7.8 *Fisherford School pupils should have been placed at Easterfield School.*

This option was disqualified in the initial stage of the options appraisal process due to the two schools not being in the immediate vicinity and the requirement for many Fisherford pupils to travel further to get to Easterfield School. The distance from the most distant parts of the Fisherford catchment to Easterfield School is more than 10 miles.

This option has not been endorsed by the Fisherford community members, as during the informal engagement and consultation period no survey respondents suggested that the Fisherford School catchment should be zoned to Easterfield School.

7.9 *Easterfield School could be used as a community space or as pop-up shops for small local businesses.*

Any use of the building that is not as a primary school, requires the school to be formally closed before they are implemented.

Aberdeenshire Council has an Asset Disposal Policy which must be followed when assets become surplus to requirements. If a decision is made to permanently close Easterfield School, there would be no requirement for the building to continue as a school. The Service would intend to declare the building surplus to requirement, other council services will be approached to express an interest in the site. This would have to be fully assessed through the asset disposal procedure. Thereafter any surplus council sites can be subject to a Community Asset Transfer Application.

The informal engagement session and options appraisal sought suggestions from the community about how they would like the school building to be used if it was closed. A full list of suggestions and comments with an overview of the requirements for them to be implemented are outlined in the Options Appraisal document. Many of the suggestions provided would require a commitment from other sectors within Aberdeenshire Council or NHS involvement or private sector commitment to be effective. These can be explored further depending upon the Council's decision on the consultation.

7.10 *Why former Easterfield School staff was not offered severance pay?*

All staff previously based at Easterfield School were either employed at other establishments or resigned from their posts within Aberdeenshire Council. All decisions were taken in adherence to the terms outlined in their contracts and HR&OD policies and procedures at the time of the agreement.

8 Education Scotland Report

8.1 In line with the Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010, a report was produced by Education Scotland on the educational aspects of the proposal.

8.2 Education Scotland attended the public meeting held on 5 March 2024 regarding the Council's proposal.

8.3 Education Scotland met with relevant consultees of Easterfield School, Auchterless School, Turriff Primary School, Turriff Academy and Auchterless, Inverkeithny & Fisherford Community Council.

8.4 The Education Scotland report is reproduced in full as Appendix H.

8.5 The Education Scotland report supports the proposal and is summarised below:

- Education Scotland agrees there are educational benefits to this proposal. Children who were at the school when it was mothballed are settled into their new schools, having more opportunities to work with and learn alongside peers of the same stage of learning.
- HM Inspectors did not agree with the Council statement that a small school roll is a significant impediment to the implementation of Curriculum for Excellence.
- Easterfield children who spoke with HM Inspectors have fond memories of the school, being part of a small, close knit school community. However, they recognise that since moving to a larger school they have gained interpersonal skills and have a wider group of friends. Children also reflected that being at a larger school will ease transition to secondary school.
- Stakeholders who spoke to HM Inspectors prefer to either merge with Auchterless School or split the catchments between Auchterless School and Turriff Primary School. However, the majority support zoning the area to Auchterless School to ensure the sustainability of rural schools across the wider area.
- Community Council members would like consideration to be given to all or part of the site being retained as a community facility and emergency centre. Other stakeholders would like the school to be used for educational or community purposes.
- Education Scotland recognises that Aberdeenshire Council have taken reasonable consideration of alternatives to closure. Re-opening the school would shorten journey times for children in the catchment area, although children are now used to travelling to their current school. Several families chose to move their children to larger schools prior to Easterfield School being mothballed and have not indicated intention to move their children to the school if it reopens.

8.6 The Council welcomes the Education Scotland report and accepts its findings. In response to the findings contained within the report, Aberdeenshire Council's response is as follows:

- The Council values small rural schools, like Auchterless School, which has been proposed as an option. However, Easterfield School with fewer than eight pupils is considered to negatively affect pupils' educational and social development and wellbeing.

- The Council acknowledges the community's concern about the future of the school building. Should the proposal go ahead any alternative use of the building would have to be fully assessed following the Asset Disposal Policy and subject to a Community Asset Transfer Application.
- The Council understands the importance of continuity of education. The council will continue specific school transport arrangements for families affected by the mothballing and being currently at any school which will become out of zone.
- If the proposal is agreed the Council will work with stakeholders to consider the future use of the site and any resources that remain within the school building and playground.

9 Alleged Omissions or Inaccuracies

- 9.1 Section (10)(3) of The Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010 sets out a requirement on the Council to provide details of any inaccuracies or omissions within the proposal document which has either been raised by the consultees or identified by the Council itself. The Council must also provide a statement on the action taken in respect of the inaccuracy or omission, or, if no action was taken, to state that fact and explain why.
- 9.2 Officers are required to publish their response to representations made during the consultation period within its final Consultation Report.
- 9.3 There were no areas identified by consultees as being inaccurate or omitted from the proposal document during the consultation period.

10 Compliance with Section 9(1) of the Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010

- 10.1 Section 9(1) of the Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010 states that: After the Education Authority has received HMIE's report, the Authority is to review the relevant proposal having regard (in particular) to:
- (a) written representations received by the Authority (from any person) during the consultation period,
 - (b) oral representations made to it (by any person) at the public meeting,
 - (c) HMIE's report.
- 10.2 The feedback from the consultation was considered by Officers and all the questions and comments raised were considered in detail. Data and factual information were checked where required and advice and input were sought from other Council Services where needed to consider the issues raised. This ensured that the Council met the requirements to review the proposal under Section 9(1) of the 2010 Act.

- 10.3 Officers of the Education Authority have considered equally and carefully all written representations.
- 10.4 The Education Authority's position is set out in Section 8 of this document.
- 10.5 The proposal was reviewed to consider whether any of the representations led the Council to reconsider other options as being reasonable alternatives to the proposal to close Easterfield School and rezone to Auchterless School or Turriff Primary School. None of the representations led Officers to conclude that any of these options should be reconsidered as reasonable alternatives.
- 10.6 The educational benefits were reviewed in respect of the Education Scotland report and representations made. There were no factors included in the Education Scotland report or representations made requiring any aspect of the educational benefits to be reconsidered.
- 10.7 Having reviewed the feedback from consultees, Officers conclude that the basis of the original proposal remained the best solution to provide appropriate and effective education provision for children residing in the Easterfield School catchment area.

11 Compliance with Sections 11A to 13 of the Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010

- 11.1 Easterfield School is a remote rural school, and the Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010 requires the Authority to have special regard to the following factors:
- (a) the likely effect on the local community in consequence of the proposal,
 - (b) the likely effect caused by any different travelling arrangements that may be required in consequence of the proposal.

As Easterfield School is a rural school, special regard was paid to the rural school factors. These were considered fully in the Options Appraisal stage and set out in the Proposal Document. Prior to launching the statutory element of the consultation, opportunities were provided to all members of the community to either suggest ways to make the school viable again or alternative uses for the building that would benefit the community.

The loss of the school, use of the building, impact on the community and likely effect caused by different travelling arrangements as well as its environmental impact have been set out in the Options Appraisal and Proposal documents.

The Council has further reviewed the proposal and the review considered whether our assessment of the rural school factors continued to be appropriate considering representations received. The Council's updated assessment is detailed further below.

11.2 Likely effect on the local community

Loss of the school

Easterfield School has been mothballed since 2021 due to a falling roll. The data on pupil numbers indicated that there were families living in the area but that they were not attending the local school. It is clear that families living in the catchment area are travelling to access education as well as other services, such as shops, post office, health care, library and other community facilities. It appears to be an accepted part of life within the community.

During its operation, the school did not offer breakfast or after-school clubs. It was occasionally used by Inverkeithny SWRI monthly, served as a polling station, and had one evening access for the Inverkeithny & Fisherford Community Association in 2020. The limited community use during the time it was operational as a school or during the periods of mothballing suggests the community does not depend on it as a public facility.

The evidence outlined above indicates that there will be little impact on the existing arrangements of the community as well as its sustainability if the school was closed.

Use of the building

In response to representations made during the consultation period, the Council's further assessment of the impact on the community's use of the building is detailed in Section 7.9 of this report.

11.3 Likely effect caused by different travelling arrangements

Travel arrangements

Aberdeenshire Council provides home to school transport for around 11,000 pupils daily to schools across Aberdeenshire. There are already pupils transported by the Authority to Auchterless School and Turriff Primary School. This includes pupils from the Easterfield catchment.

The travel distance and travel time between Easterfield School and Auchterless School or Turriff Primary School is not considered to be unreasonable. It is not uncommon for pupils to travel greater distances to reach their school and travelling for primary school education is common across Aberdeenshire because of the geography of the area.

Further information on the likely effect caused by different travelling arrangements has been set out in Section 12 of the Proposal Document.

Environmental impact

During the consultation period, there were no representations made regarding environmental impact due to different travel arrangements. However, this aspect of the proposal has been assessed and detailed in Section 14 of the Proposal Document.

The negative environmental impact due to travel arrangements of Easterfield pupils is minimal, due to the very small number of children and short distances involved and will be offset by the closure of a dated and underutilised school building.

12 Representations to Scottish Ministers in terms of Section 15 of the Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010

- 12.1 If the Authority makes a final decision to implement the proposal, it will be required to notify the Scottish Ministers of that decision and provide them with a copy of the proposal document and consultation report. This must be done within six working days of that decision. The Scottish Ministers have an eight-week period from the date of that final decision to decide if they will call-in the proposal.
- 12.2 Within the first three weeks of that eight-week period, the Scottish Ministers will take account of any relevant representations made to them by any person. Until the outcome of the eight-week call-in process is known, the Authority cannot proceed to implement the proposal.
- 12.3 If the Scottish Ministers call-in the proposal, they must refer the proposal to the Convener of the School Closure Review Panels who may refuse to consent to the proposal or grant their consent to the proposal subject to conditions or unconditionally.
- 12.4 It should be noted that the legislation allows for any person to make representations to Scottish Ministers within three weeks of the Council taking their final decision to implement a closure proposal.
- 12.5 Aberdeenshire Council will make the decision on whether or not to implement this closure proposal at its meeting on 26 September 2024. If the decision is taken to implement the closure proposal, any representations to Scottish Ministers, therefore, in this context need to be with the Ministers within three weeks of this date. Therefore, any representations must be made to Scottish Ministers by 16 October 2024.
- 12.6 Anyone wishing to make representation to Scottish Ministers during the three-week period referred to above should do so by email to schoolclosure@gov.scot or in writing to:

The Scottish Government
School Infrastructure Unit
2A (South) Victoria Quay

Edinburgh
EH6 6QQ

13 Conclusions

- 13.1 In review of the oral and written submissions to the formal consultation and survey results, it is clear that there is stakeholder support for the proposal to close Easterfield School.
- 13.2 Officers have carefully considered the opportunities, issues and challenges identified by stakeholders during both the informal engagement and formal consultation processes.
- 13.3 The Council now has four options, namely:
- (a) Adopt the proposal; or
 - (b) Amend the proposal in a minor way and adopt; or
 - (c) Amend the proposal significantly and undertake a further consultation exercise on a new proposal; or
 - (d) Withdraw the proposal and maintain the status quo.
- 13.4 Each option is discussed below.

(a) Adopt the proposal

If the Council chooses to adopt the proposal and close Easterfield School on a permanent basis then one of the two options for merging Easterfield School outlined in the proposal document would also need to be chosen.

The most popular option amongst respondents was *Option 1*, to realign the Easterfield School catchment area with Auchterless School. This option is supported by 11 (65%) respondents, out of all 17 responses to the survey. 11 (65%) respondents to the survey support the closure of Easterfield School and out of those eight (73%) is in favour of *Option 1*. The majority of stakeholders who spoke with Education Scotland have also chosen *Option 1* as a preferred one to ensure the sustainability of rural schools across the wider area.

If the Council adopts the proposal, it would be on the basis that the educational benefits set out in the proposal document would materialise and a period of uncertainty for the community would come to an end. Children will have access to greater learning opportunities and experiences and increased socialisation through being part of a larger school. Opportunities to participate in peer support, classroom learning, learning groups across stages and between classes and opportunities to engage at lunchtime, after school and team events will be increased. The projected numbers of children within the Easterfield catchment are insufficient to make the school viable. Significant factors in this are parental placing requests to other schools and the declining population in rural areas. Auchterless School and Turriff Primary School have the capacity to accommodate additional children. The proposal will assist the Council in

delivering “Sustainable Learning Estate” by maximising its occupancy and ‘Best Value’ by making more efficient and effective use of its resources.

In summary, the key points that have been highlighted during the consultation period are as follows:

- The report from Education Scotland recognised that there are educational benefits for pupils as outlined in the Council’s proposal. Children who were transferred to other schools are settled well and enjoy learning alongside their peers.
- The Council, having had special regard to the rural school factors, does not consider that the proposal will adversely affect the sustainability of the community. Indeed, there may be a positive opportunity for the Easterfield School building to be used for community use if it ceases to be used as a school.
- The proposal has generally been supported by the parents/carers and staff who responded to the proposal.
- A number of pupils are already making their journey to Auchterless School or Turriff Primary School, some as the result of successful placing requests. Free home to school transport would be provided for all pupils from the Easterfield catchment area to attend Auchterless School or Turriff Primary School.

(b) Amend the proposal in a minor way and adopt

During the consultation period suggestions were made that following the closure parents should have the option to decide which school they want their children to attend and that the Fisherford School catchment should be realigned with Easterfield School.

The proposal was reviewed to consider whether any of the representations led the Council to reconsider the above suggestions as being reasonable alternatives to the proposal. to close Easterfield School and rezone to Auchterless School or Turriff Primary School. None of the representations led Officers to conclude that any of these options should be reconsidered as reasonable alternatives. The Council’s position has been outlined in Sections 7.3 and 7.8 of this report.

(c) Amend the proposal significantly and undertake a further consultation exercise on a new proposal

The Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010 requires that changes to the school estate are subject to rigorous statutory consultation. Any significant amendments to the proposal would require a full consultation with pupils, parents/carers and the wider community of all affected by the proposal schools. Allowing for appropriate governance the process can take in the region of nine months to complete.

This is considered to be unreasonable to go through another lengthy statutory

consultation process. The uncertainty surrounding the future of the school has impacted the community and it is hoped that this statutory consultation to close Easterfield School will give clarity to the community and a sense of certainty regarding their children's education.

Having reviewed the Education Scotland report and feedback from consultees, Officers concluded that the basis of the original proposal continues to be the most appropriate response to the unsustainable school roll of Easterfield School.

(d) Withdraw the proposal and maintain the status quo.

This option would be to continue to mothball Easterfield School. Maintaining the status quo would continue the uncertainty for the community. The repeated attempts to seek enrolments to school suggest that it would be difficult for Easterfield School to re-open with a viable roll in the near future.

Withdrawing the proposal, the Council would be failing to recognise or respond to the educational and social benefits for Easterfield children. Education Scotland has recognised that the proposal would lead to clear educational benefits for Easterfield pupils.

14 Recommendation(s)

- 14.1 On the basis of the feedback received during the consultation period and taking account of the educational and social benefits of the proposal, it is concluded that the recommendation in Section 14.2 is the most reasonable, appropriate, sustainable and viable option.
- 14.2 **The recommendation of the Officers is that the Council should adopt the proposal to permanently close Easterfield School and re-assign its catchment to Auchterless School.**