

Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010

Report by Education Scotland addressing educational aspects of the proposal by Aberdeenshire Council to discontinue education at Easterfield School, which is currently mothballed and re-assigning its catchment to Auchterless School or Turriff Primary School.

April 2024

1. Introduction

1.1 This report from Education Scotland has been prepared by His Majesty's Inspectors of Education (HM Inspectors) in accordance with the terms of the [Schools \(Consultation\) \(Scotland\) Act 2010](#) ("the 2010 Act"). The purpose of the report is to provide an independent and impartial consideration of a proposal by Aberdeenshire Council to discontinue education at Easterfield School, which is currently mothballed and re-assigning its catchment to Auchterless School or Turriff Primary School. Section 2 of the report sets out brief details of the consultation process. Section 3 of the report sets out HM Inspectors' consideration of the educational aspects of the proposal, including significant views expressed by consultees. Section 4 summarises HM Inspectors' overall view of the proposal. Upon receipt of this report, the Act requires the council to consider it alongside any relevant considerations the council received and then prepare its consultation report. The council's consultation report should include this report and must contain an explanation of how, in finalising the proposal, it has reviewed the initial proposal, including a summary of points raised during the consultation process and the council's response to them. The council has to publish its consultation report at least three weeks before it takes its final decision. With all proposals the council needs to follow all statutory obligations set out in the 2010 Act. Where a council is proposing to close a school, there are specific additional obligations. These include notifying Ministers within six working days of making its final decision and explaining to consultees the opportunity they have to make representations to Ministers. There are special provisions that apply to close a rural school.

1.2 HM Inspectors considered:

- the likely effects of the proposal for children of the school; any other users; children likely to become pupils within two years of the date of publication of the proposal paper; and other children and young people in the council area;
- any other likely effects of the proposal;
- how the council intends to minimise or avoid any adverse effects that may arise from the proposal; and
- the educational benefits the council believes will result from implementation of the proposal, and the council's reasons for coming to these beliefs.

1.3 In preparing this report, HM Inspectors undertook the following activities:

- attendance at the public meeting held on 5 March 2024 in connection with the council's proposals;
- consideration of all relevant documentation provided by the council in relation to the proposal, specifically the educational benefits statement and related consultation documents, written and oral submissions from parents and others; and
- visits to the site of Auchterless School, Turriff Primary School, Turriff Academy and with Auchterless, Inverkeithny & Fisherford Community Council including discussion with relevant consultees.

1.4 As the proposal will lead to the closure of a rural school(s), HM Inspectors also took account of the council's consideration of any reasonable alternatives to closure of Easterfield School, the likely effect on the local community and the likely effect of any different travelling arrangements of the proposed closure.

2. Consultation process

2.1 Aberdeenshire Council undertook the consultation on its proposal(s) with reference to the [Schools \(Consultation\) \(Scotland\) Act 2010](#).

2.2 Aberdeenshire Council took the decision to mothball Easterfield School from August 2021 when the school roll decreased to eight children in May 2021. The school has remained mothballed since this time. The council completed a pre-consultation and engaged with the local community in October 2023. The statutory consultation on the proposal to discontinue education provision in Easterfield School ran between 5 February and 29 March 2024. The proposal was posted on Aberdeenshire Council's website and made available to all stakeholders. Copies of the proposal were posted to all residents within the current Easterfield School catchment area. The proposal invites stakeholders to consider two potential options. Option 1 - Close Easterfield School and merge with Auchterless School. Option 2 - Close Easterfield School and merge with Turriff Primary School. Easterfield, Auchterless and Turriff Primary Schools are all zoned to Turriff Academy.

2.3 Aberdeenshire Council held a public meeting at Turriff Primary School on 5 March 2024. No members of the public attended the meeting. The council received no written responses to the proposal. An online survey received responses from 17 individuals. Most individuals were either parents/carers or staff members. The majority of responses support the closure of Easterfield School. Option 1, a merger with Auchterless School, was preferred by 64% of respondents, and option 2, a merger with Turriff Primary School, was preferred by 11% of respondents. A minority of respondents suggested alternative options including Easterfield School remaining open and dual zone between Auchterless School and Turriff Primary School. Pupil engagement was carried out at both Auchterless School and Turriff Primary School. Children identified a range of potential advantages, including increased friendships and access to a range of facilities, and disadvantages including busy classrooms and playgrounds.

3. Educational aspects of proposal

3.1 HM Inspectors agree there are educational benefits to this proposal. Children who were at the school when it was mothballed are settled into their new schools. Children from the area have opportunities to work with, and learn alongside peers that are at the same stage of learning in the schools they now attend. This supports their team working and social skills. However, in its proposal the council has stated that the size of the school provides significant impediments to the successful implementation of Curriculum for Excellence. HM Inspectors do not support the view that a small school roll is, in itself, a significant impediment to the implementation of Curriculum for Excellence. Several families chose to send their children to larger schools prior to Easterfield School being mothballed and have not indicated that they would want to move their children to the school were it to reopen. Data for the Easterfield catchment indicates that there is unlikely to be any increase of children living in the area over the next few years.

3.2 Children and young people that HM Inspectors spoke to, that had attended Easterfield School, have fond memories of the school. They enjoyed 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. Young people reflected that very small schools can provide a high level of personal support, but also that the transition to secondary school can be more difficult.

3.3 Stakeholders who spoke to HM Inspectors prefer the options to either merge with Auchterless School or split the catchments between Auchterless School and Turriff Primary School. Parents/carers and community representatives that spoke to HM Inspectors understand

the need for efficient use of education resources. However, they want to ensure the sustainability of rural schools across the wider area for both children and communities. This is partly why, if the proposal is agreed, the majority support zoning the area to Auchterless School as another rural school. They also recognise that both Auchterless School and Turriff Primary School have capacity and so parental choice will continue to be an option. Within its proposal the council states that all existing primary age children, and their younger siblings, living in the Easterfield area will be able to continue their education at the school they currently attend. The council will need to ensure school transport arrangements support this. HM Inspectors agree that continuity of education is important.

3.4 As the proposal will lead to the closure of a rural school HM Inspectors also took account of the council's consideration of the factors to which it should have special regard. The 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. Stakeholders feel that the mothballing and potential closure of the school is a loss to the community. The school provided a venue for some community events. Stakeholders are aware that the council are also consulting on closing a nearby school, Fisherford School. Community Council members would like consideration to be given to all or part of one of the sites being retained as a community facility and emergency centre. If the proposal is agreed, stakeholders are concerned that the building and equipment within it may be left to deteriorate. Ideally, they would like the school to be used for educational or community purposes, however they recognise this may not be possible. If the proposal is agreed they want the council to move quickly to explore the future use of the building to avoid it becoming derelict.

4. Summary

HM Inspectors agree there are educational benefits as outlined in the council's proposal. Children are settled and enjoy learning alongside their peers in the schools they have moved to. If the proposal is agreed the council will need to consider which option will be best in terms of where the Easterfield catchment area is allocated. As part of this they should consider the sustainability of rural schools across the area. The council may also need to consider specific school transport arrangements for children, and their younger siblings, currently at any school which will become out of zone. If the proposal is agreed the council should work with stakeholders to consider the future use of the site and any resources that remain within the school building and playground.

HM Inspectors
April 2024