

Clatt School Closure Statutory Consultation Public Meeting

Clatt Village Hall

1 October 2024 6.30pm

Officers Present: Cllr David Keating (Chair of Education and Children's Services Committee, Anne-Marie Davies McLeod (Head of Resources and Performance), Maxine Booth (Quality Improvement Manager), Rachael Goldring (Learning Estates Team Leader), Gemma Dacre (Learning Estates Officer, minutes)

HM Inspector – Alona Murray

1. Welcome and Introductions

Cllr Keating introduced himself as Chair of Education and Children's Services Committee and the team then welcomed people to the meeting.

The format of the meeting will be an overview of the proposal we are considering and then we will take questions from the floor. We want to make sure that everyone has a chance to be heard. Please be aware that this meeting will be minuted and the minutes will be made public as part of the consultation. I will now pass over to Anne-Marie for the overview of the proposal.

Participants gave their name and interest in the meeting.

2. Overview of Proposal

Anne Marie - A decision to temporarily mothball Clatt School from August 2022 was taken by the Director of Education & Children's Services, and since then the school remains non-operational. There was no in zone or out of zone enrolments since the school has been officially mothballed. Only two families have expressed an interest in their children enrolling at the school since the mothballing period began.

Officers have completed an option appraisal for the future of the school. The Clatt community have been given the opportunity to present alternatives to closure and to present their views for the authority to consider. Those have been thoroughly analysed. The majority of potential uses identified by the community would require the building to be discontinued as a primary school, which requires a statutory consultation under the Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010.

Officers took into account many factors when carrying out the options appraisal and preparing this proposal.

A Place and Wellbeing assessment was held in June this year to look at the option appraisal and the future of Clatt School. The details of the assessment can be found on the Aberdeenshire Engage page, Aberdeenshire Council website and a couple of paper copies are available upon request this evening.

This consultation proposes to discontinue education at Clatt School and re-assign its catchment area to either Kennethmont School or Rhynie School. This proposal would apply to the primary school stages of education (P1-P7) in the Clatt catchment area. The proposed changes, if approved, will take place immediately after the conclusion of the statutory process relating to school closures. Max will present the options.

Maxine Booth - The proposal consists of two options for stakeholders to consider, namely:

Option 1 – Close Clatt School and merge with Kennethmont School (Map 1)

Option 2 – Close Clatt School and merge with Rhynie School (Map 2)

The maps are available to view on the tables along with other information. It is important that the proposal does not have a negative impact upon any children currently attending schools affected by this proposal and that they have continuity in their education. Whichever decision is taken, no existing pupils will be required to change their school. This will also apply to any younger siblings of those pupils, provided they remain at the same primary school.

3. Chair opens the floor to questions

Participant – I find it extremely sad that it is coming to this conclusion when there are 12 pupils within catchment that could go to Clatt School. Is it not indicative of modern day government policy that decimates communities by giving parents the choice to put pupils to any school they so wish. For our community that is what has happened, people put their children elsewhere and pupil numbers became unsustainable. We have had 170 years of Clatt school. We are the generation that went to Clatt School and we are the generation that are closing it.

Cllr Keating – I'm obviously not going to comment on government policy. This was not the only school where we have that level of out of zone request. I would just like to clarify the fact that you can only get an out of zone place if there is space at the school.

Across Aberdeenshire, we have many schools with a changing demographic. The truth is that even if we kept all in zone pupils to their zoned school, we would still have a lot of spare school places. We have an obligation to manage the learning estate, we are short of money yes, but this is about educational benefits for the children. People have the right to choose which school they want their children to attend.

Participant – It is government policy; we know that but they should have an obligation to the community too. No question about that Clatt School was closing. We had a meeting with the Wellbeing chap in June and came up with a lot of ideas

but this detracts from the core issue of our school closing and pupils going elsewhere.

Participant – He is right, there could be 12 children, but we could be down to 8 and below and then the school is back to being closed again. We can't carry on opening a school and closing it again. Children have moved away and won't get back. I asked my grandchildren if they would want to go back to Clatt and they said no. Also asked my neighbours and they said no too. They want to stay at Rhynie.

Participant – Clatt pupil numbers fell to 9 when I was at school. There are always peaks and troughs. There was a time of loyalty in a community. If I had asked to go to another school, do you think my parents would let this happen. I would be put to the school of my community.

Participant – Clatt was going to be down to four or five, we can't run a school with those numbers.

Participant – there were 4 children who could have gone.

Participant – when I was on the community council, there was a local councillor who always said you could close five small schools and amalgamate them and it would still be a very small school. It has happened in Deeside and they still have small schools. We have a depopulation problem and are filling communities up with pensioners.

Participant – I brought up at numerous meetings, in years gone past we have tried for planning permission to build in Clatt, dozens of times. When a community is static, it goes into reverse. If there is no building at all and if anyone expresses an interest, all hell breaks loose. People move into community and don't want change. That is where Clatt is missing out .

Cllr Keating – I absolutely recognise about the history of Clatt; we have many schools that are dear to the community across Aberdeenshire. I won't get into planning policy but there is a process and rules to follow. It is an emotive subject and I fully respect that. We can only sit here and look at what we are seeing and people are choosing to move their children as is their right. I can appreciate it doesn't make you feel better and it is deeply hurtful. We have to deal with the situation and the data, which is the only basis we can form our opinion on and we do consider the future. We are just not seeing a population rise.

Participant – When you are saying you are looking forward and only two families expressed an interest and not from out with. We were told we couldn't look out with the village itself, had to be the catchment itself. We were told nobody could. I drove my out of zone children to Clatt every day. Why was that different?

Maxine Booth – There is a difference. We gave a date when it would be an appropriate time for us to launch the consultation. And there had to be enough in zone children for a number of years to make the school viable for re-opening. For example, If the children had been mostly P7's who would have gone shortly to

secondary school this would not have been sustainable. During the P1 admissions period we sent out a letter to see if anyone had interest in returning or enrolling their children at Clatt School if it were to re-open. This is the statutory consultation process so couldn't accept out of zone children.

Participant – Thank you, I just wasn't sure why it was different.

Maxine Booth – This is about safeguarding the children's education and wellbeing. When we initially had meetings, one of the parents said to us that they were pleased you have finally made the decision, we have been expecting something for a while. Once the children have moved it is a big transition to start with. We just didn't have that number of 8 or above that we are looking for to re-open the school. It is difficult decision as we need to know if there will be enough children to re-open so it doesn't have to be mothballed again in a few years' time if the numbers dropped too low.

Participant - It is difficult as once a school is under consultation like that, no-one is going to put their children to that school they are not going to have confidence. Regardless of if they are in zone or out of zone, you're not going to move them. When we put our children in to Clatt it took the school roll to 18 but with lower numbers and under threat of closure you're not going to.

Anne-Marie – That's the challenge for us and the community. At some point we have to engage with the community and parents. It becomes difficult to see a way forward. Unfortunately we are having these discussions with a good number of communities across Aberdeenshire, while this is no reassurance for this community. I see the plaques around the wall here in the hall and understand community is important to you all. We are committed to rural schools but we have almost 50 schools with less than 50 children in each school. Even if we group them together this is not sustainable. We are keen to look at and discuss with communities to protect rural education. I agree with the point well made, that the roll of a school fluctuates.

Participant – The numbers are only down as far as that latterly; the numbers had been steady for a number of years. If folk moving in had just put their kids to the school it would probably still be open today.

Participant – You are 100% right, but we can't turn back the clock. My grandkids are off to Rhynie and are not going to go back if it re-opens regardless. Not the school we are thinking about it's the children. We have to think about the children. The school was going to be down to 4 or 5 children, this is not sustainable whatever happens. It is Happening right across the board.

Participant – There are 12 pupils in the catchment.

Participant – It is not happening, they are not coming back.

Cllr Keating – I appreciate the emotion, but we are having these conversations across Aberdeenshire, we know it is difficult, but we have to look at the data and follow the law.

Participant – It is not just (redacted) who is unhappy about this, you aren't either. Rural living comes with issues, we have to move on and accept it. Rural living provides other issues such as mothers can't get childcare. School finishes at 3pm it is hard to find a job within these hours. We need to do something with the building to help with this.

Anne-Marie – You mentioned earlier that you met with Matthew, this is something Max and her team have been keen to promote. I know sometimes it looks like it is all about forecasts, numbers etc but we do understand there are other aspects important to the community. We recognise the issues regarding childcare and have had to take some difficult decisions in our larger settings. We are also really keen to look to communities, to work with them to find solutions. I have a team doing just that, looking at how to recruit more childminders and we are looking at what future will be. If we are going to keep heart of the community, maybe this needs to evolve from just being the school and work to maintain the heart in the community.

Participant – With the school going, we are struggling to hold on to the hall and kirk. The shop and post office have been gone for some time, there is going to be nothing. We are not fighting hard enough for it, just sitting back and letting it happen. To me, the closure of Clatt School is just another nail in the coffin. I understand people have the choice but find it frustrating.

Cllr Keating – Welcomed a new attendee to the meeting and gave a brief summary of why we are here, to discuss the consultation for the closure of Clatt School which has been mothballed for a while. We are looking at 2 options, 1 is to Close Clatt School and merge with Kennethmont School and Option 2 is to close Clatt School and merge with Rhynie School.

Maxine Booth – Maxine indicated that catchment maps were available to view and that there will be time after the meeting to have a look at all the information and discuss with officers too.

Participant – We all know the school is shut, as a parent who is part of a family who have all gone to this school for seven generations, my oldest was due to start school in that period. Both are no longer at primary school now. We had three different Head Teachers. The paper work sent in the post mentioned a 1 teacher school but it was a 2 teacher school. It was a hard decision to pull my child out of Clatt School, heartbreaking as my husband's family was born and bred here. We were not the only family to move our children, but around about that time was the start of the downfall. In Clatt there are more than eight children, and more than eight when it was decided it would be mothballed. No-one wanted to go but it may not be known why people were doing it. Consistent reason for doing it, if all those moving had been listened to but I know maybe not all people were honest with their reasons for moving in the form. The numbers were there. We have had three families move into the village recently, the numbers were there but the reasons for moving were not looked into. In the first year Clatt was closed but overturned by Scottish Government it had lost half the children to Rhynie but parents weren't going to move them back. It is too late to

change that now. I would like the authority to take notice for other schools, and the reasons why children are being moved to another school.

Maxine Booth – The process of out of zone placements has now been centralised. Our team get all the applications now. Before it would go to the receiving school and they would make a decision so we are not sure of the reasons for moving back then but because it is centralised now, we get all the information about why. If we see more than one family, as you say there is not always a reason, but we can see the pattern. It has happened in a big school, previously. We pick up on it and discuss with the QIO who line manages that school and follow up with school. That process wasn't in place back then as it is now. We have moved on and learned from that and we are acting when we see children leaving. It can happen throughout the year if there is an issue with school or they have perhaps fallen out with a friend or there is something going wrong with management or a teacher, there are many reasons. Even if we just get one parent, this is passed onto the QIO to make sure something is being done about it.

Participant – We know there is enough children, they are just not subscribing to the local school. The issue is why they are not choosing to go there. It is important when communication is coming out that it is honest about the reasons.

Rachael Goldring – We do get information from the NHS annually that shows us how many children are living in catchment. We can see how many one, two three year olds are in the catchment.

Participant – We could help you quicker with that information.

Rachael Goldring – We do have that info, you're right there are more children in the catchment area but not enough wanted to come back to make the school viable.

Participant – And we are back to that cycle again. I wouldn't be moving my kids if settled.

Anne-Marie – We have a declining pupil roll right across the board and we are seeing this impact on the communities. Max and her team have done analysis about how many spaces there across Aberdeenshire, they have information about the utilisation of buildings. There are thousands of spaces. The reasons why people choose schools are so complex, it is something we do talk about a lot. Many parents don't provide a reason, they don't have to. We have looked at a set, and the reasons ranged from smaller schools, out of school clubs, the childminders there, activities. There are no clearly defined patterns other than we are seeing it in small communities. There are lots of complex reasons. We do look at the reasons why people move. I'm sorry you felt experience didn't go well back then.

Participant – There is frustration about what went on. People are perhaps selfishly not interested in what happens when you leave and are not going to fight to get justice once your kids are gone. In the few years prior, we were one child away from two classes and had a good teacher. Nobody questioned that. It feels like the council are being reactive and not proactive. As a community we don't have trust the

correct protocols were followed. My kids are not in primary, Rhynie and Kennethmont are sharing a HT temporarily. From a parents point of view for the kids being moved from here, surely those teachers and schools should have more resources. They are still short staffed. Have they benefitted from it?

Anne-Marie – There are real challenges recruiting managers into schools. We recognise if we are going to sustain small schools, there may be a need to have different management structures that allow for Head Teachers to allow for the leadership and improvement of the school which allows teachers to be part of this. The primary position is in a much better position but we do see some challenges. We are also building other management into a school and looking at ways to strengthen school management.

Participant – I did ask at previous meetings if there could be a shared Head Teacher between Clatt and Kennethmont.

Participant – we have to admit we have had to fight for the school since I can remember. It has been an ongoing fight to keep it open but we are beyond that now. Let's move on.

Participant - The minute you stop fighting for something, you lose it.

Participant – It's lost already.

Cllr Keating – I don't want to shut you off entirely and appreciate how difficult it is for the community; I would like to think you can all agree that we have heard and listened to what you have said. As a council we perhaps didn't look at reasons in the past, as we try to do now by looking at the information and intervening beforehand.

Participant – I think it's the same with any situation if someone can learn from it, that's the next best thing. Rural areas are suffering from a lack of teachers. There should be a process in place to protect rural schools. We don't want super schools. We can't protect Clatt now. We have other local schools and don't want to lose them either. Where do we go if they are gone, Huntly? Worried there will be a domino effect. We need to know that what happened in the past has been learned from.

Cllr Keating – The officers are doing what you've asked us to do. It is absolutely the desire of elected members and Aberdeenshire officers to retain rural education. We are not going to build a bunch of super schools and depopulate all the rural schools. We are looking to make rural schools sustainable where possible. You asked something about teachers and I will pass to Anne-Marie to answer.

Anne-Marie – We have an annual redeployment process based off the back of data that the Learning Estates team collect who know who is going into P1. We do school modelling and have a staffing formula to allocate our teachers. This goes out to all Head Teachers to let them know that this is what your allocation will be. There may be opportunities for re deployment for example when someone goes on maternity. No one gets made redundant they will be placed into another school. The same

goes for administrative staff, catering staff. No-one is appointed to work in a specific school, they are employed by Aberdeenshire Council.

Cllr Keating – Are there any other questions?

Participant – What is the way forward now?

Cllr Keating - The consultation is open until 8th November. This adequately covers the required period of 30 days of term time consultation. Any comments you wish to make on the proposal need to be submitted by 4pm on Friday 8 November 2024. Comments can be submitted by email to LearningEstates@aberdeenshire.gov.uk or in writing to Learning Estates, Gordon House, Blackhall Road, Inverurie AB51 3WA.

We would encourage you to take part in the consultation and give your opinions via the online survey. The link and QR code to the questionnaire is displayed on the posters as well as on the Education Consultation page on the Aberdeenshire Council website.

Paper copies of the survey are also available for anyone who may wish to complete it on their way out.

We are also involving pupils in our discussions, and Head Teachers have been asked to work with pupils to gain their views on the proposals.

Once the consultation period is over, all written submissions, minutes of this meeting and pupil discussions will be provided to Education Scotland for their consideration. Education Scotland will produce a report on the consultation. A final report on the consultation will be presented at Marr Area Committee, Education & Children's Services Committee and Full Council where all 70 councillors attend, for a decision.

Following the Full Council meeting, the Council will enter an eight-week call-in period when members of the public can ask Scottish Ministers to call in the decision. If the decision is not called in the Council will be able to proceed with the project. If the proposal is called in, the School Closure Review Panel will consider the proposal. This may take up to 16 weeks. If the panel grants consent to the proposal, the Council will then commence the implementation process.

That's the process going forward.

Cllr Keating addresses a newcomer to the meeting. We have gone through a lot, would you like me to summarise?

Participant – No thank you, I can ask the others afterwards and have been to meetings before.

Cllr Keating - If anyone has any further questions please ask.

Participant – You have talked through the process, what is the timeline?

Rachael Goldring – We hope to attend Marr Area Committee next spring then Education and Children's Services Committee which may be spring but it depends on submission deadlines could be early summer. By the start of the next academic

year. The consultation document sets out the options. It will either be all of the Clatt School catchment area to Rhynie School or all of Clatt to the Kennethmont catchment area, unless other alternatives are suggested from people during the consultation process.

Participant – So it could potentially be split between two different schools, but this would be detrimental to community. Clatt already has two schools to support in the community for example the community fundraising at Asda where we had to choose which school to support, either Rhynie or Kennethmont. It is a small example but goes to show if you split an area, it then becomes difficult for fundraising and other things.

Rachael Goldring – When we were looking at the catchment areas, we did consider having an option of a split but decided this would not be a good option as we could not see a way of splitting the catchment that made sense. There would be people on one side of the line who would have to cross it to go to their new zoned school.

Participant – The geography of it makes things difficult. Leslie was zoned into Clatt years ago and they got the option of going to Insch, Clatt or Premnay. It was difficult to split the area. School transport can be a dilemma.

Anne-Marie – It is important to hear from all of you. We can look at maps, transport logistics, what makes sense but want to know what makes more sense to the community.

Participant – Transport costs must come into it?

Anne-Marie – We have a spend of 23 million pounds on transport and don't get much from the government in terms of settlement. Our primary consideration is not expecting kids to sit too long on transport, the costs are second to this.

Participant – I thought we wanted to head to net zero not just the cost of transport. When talking about when children went to different schools, yet we have some children who live in the same village with special needs who have the choice to go to different schools.

Anne-Marie - A decision about catchments has to be made through this process, that's why we want to hear from you. We can put our professional judgements out there but we want to hear from you.

Participant – I remember about Gartly, the nursery was there. There is a nursery at Rhynie and the children will want to keep going there after they finish nursery.

Cllr Keating a number of conflicting requirements. We can have many individually really good ideas but they don't always agree. We need to find a way forward. I know it has been said and it is absolutely the case that we are interested in educational benefits which are at the heart of it and at the top of the list. At Education and Children's Committee, every committee member starts with what is important for the children.

Cllr Keating – I am going to close the meeting and we will look at all the information. Thank you for attending. It is clear that it is a hurtful meeting to ask you to come to. Very clear, please know this is not lightly taken by officers.

Participant – Matthew Smart said we will we get further assistance from council to do something at the end process if something can be done for the building.

Cllr Keating – We don't want to say that it is absolutely certain what we can do with building. It is absolutely part of community.

Participant - Matthew said once it is no longer an education building it then becomes a different department.

Maxine Booth – Yes, the Marr Area Office will assist with the process.

Cllr Keating – Please also talk to your local elected members.

Anne-Marie – This will go to another team, but we are one council. I will absolutely make sure the message is made clear.

Participant –We want to make Clatt unique and be a trail blazer is what Matthew said.

Maxine Booth – You can read a copy of the Place and Wellbeing Assessment. We have copies in the room and you can also view a copy and on the engage website online.

Cllr Keating – It is important we gain feedback. I will close the meeting, thank you all for coming and we invite you to view the maps and information on the tables.