



EDUCATION & CHILDREN'S SERVICES

APPENDIX 1

**CONSULTATION REPORT REGARDING
THE CLOSURE OF FISHERFORD 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 Fisherford School, which is currently mothballed and re-assign its catchment area to either Auchterless School or Rayne North School or to split the catchment between Auchterless School and Rayne North 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 Fisherford 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 Rayne North School
 - Parents of pupils at Auchterless School and Rayne North School
 - Pupils at Auchterless School and Rayne North School
 - Parents of pre-school age children living within the Fisherford School catchment area

- Staff at Auchterless School and Rayne North School
 - Trade union representatives of staff at Auchterless School and Rayne North School
 - Auchterless, Inverkeithny and Fisherford Community Council
 - Local Early Years Partner Providers
 - Fisherford School catchment residents
 - Education Scotland
- 2.5 The consultation proposal was posted to all residents of the Fisherford 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 Rayne North 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 Formartine Area Office was provided with spare copies of the proposal and the poster to be displayed at the establishment 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 at Fisherford 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 6 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 Fisherford School, Auchterless School, Rayne North School, Turriff Academy and Meldrum 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 was 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:
- Fisherford School
 - Auchterless School
 - Rayne North School
- 3.3 The proposal on which the consultation took place was:
- To discontinue education at Fisherford School, which is currently mothballed and re-assign its catchment to either Auchterless School or Rayne North School or split the catchment between Auchterless School and Rayne North School.***
- 3.4 The proposal document gave three options for realigning the Fisherford catchment area either in full to Auchterless School or in full to Rayne North School or splitting the Fisherford catchment between the two schools. Eight further options for realigning the catchment were discounted, and two alternatives to closure were identified as being to reopen the school or for Fisherford to remain mothballed.
- 3.5 The proposal document stated that the Fisherford School catchment area would

be reassigned to one of the neighbouring primary schools: Auchterless School or Rayne North School or a combination of the two schools.

- 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 Fisherford 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 Fisherford catchment area would be entitled to school transport should they choose to attend the designated school.
- 3.9 If Fisherford 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 Fisherford School again.
- 4.3 Educational benefits are considered below for pupils if either of the identified options is adopted.
- 4.4 If Fisherford 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 Rayne North 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 Educational benefits are considered below for pupils if either of the options mentioned in Section 7 are adopted.
- 4.20 Pupils at Auchterless and Rayne North 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 Fisherford 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.

- 4.21 A larger school roll offers children from the Fisherford 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.
- 4.22 Pupils at Auchterless and Rayne North 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. Rayne North School has curriculum open events, school trips, school shows, sports day, end of term services and coffee mornings.
- 4.23 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. Rayne North School has house captains and house groups who work on groups such as eco and Rights Respecting Schools; there are also talking houses to talk about school issues, Lego Club and Code Club. Rayne North School offers pupils opportunities for sporting opportunities within the cluster or authority.
- 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. Rayne North School works cooperatively on school improvement and transition activities with Logie Durno and Old Rayne.
- 4.26 Auchterless and Rayne North Schools have Parent Councils that support learning, teaching, school improvement, and parental and community engagement. If Fisherford 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 a church yard and walks. Rayne North School has a large playing field and an eco-garden.

- 4.28 It is Aberdeenshire Council's view that the pupils from the Fisherford 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 majority of pupils residing within the Fisherford School catchment area currently attend a school which borders with the Fisherford School catchment. No adverse effects for those pupils are expected to arise from the permanent closure of Fisherford 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 6 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 41 survey participants, 25 (61%) were parents/carers, seven (17%) were staff members and nine (22%) were community members. The survey revealed that 25 (61%) respondents favoured the closure of Fisherford School, while three (7%) opposed it and 13 (32%) had no preference. Regarding proposed options, 30 (73%) supported *Option 2* (closing Fisherford School and merging with Rayne North School), 10 (24%) favoured *Option 3* (closing Fisherford School and splitting its catchment between Auchterless School and Rayne North School) and one believed that none of the proposed options should be consulted upon. None of the survey participants supported *Option 1* (closing Fisherford School and merging with Auchterless School).

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 Rayne North School discussed the proposal regarding the closure of Fisherford School and re-assigning its catchment to either Auchterless or Rayne North.

In general, pupils from both schools welcomed the proposal and had no objections to Fisherford 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 Fisherford School has been mothballed since August 2021, all staff previously based at Fisherford School have been employed at other establishments and some are no longer employed by Aberdeenshire Council. Staff within Auchterless and Rayne North Schools have been given the opportunity to discuss the proposal and provided their feedback through the online survey. Of the seven staff members who completed the survey, the vast majority support the proposal to close Fisherford School and merge it with Rayne North 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 *Rothienorman School should be considered as an option due to proximity, potentially easing travel for pupils living closer to Rothienorman.*

Officers considered Rothienorman School as a possible option for Fisherford pupils, assessing in total four options, and concluded these options would not be reasonable. As outlined in Section 8 of the Proposal Document, Rothienorman School was discounted due to its utilisation of capacity and the size of the community that Rothienorman serves. Additionally, merging Fisherford with Rothienorman scored poorly in the options appraisal assessment and creating a dual zone between Rothienorman and Auchterless or Rayne North would go against the Aberdeenshire Council Learning Estates Strategy.

7.3 Urgency in selling the building to prevent deterioration and benefit the village; Hoping that the Council will make good use of the building.

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 Fisherford 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.

7.4 Suggestions for new boundary lines: The boundary for Rayne North should include B992 road up to the entrance of the Fisherford village and a natural zoning boundary between Rayne North and Auchterless schools should be established along The Black Burn, situated at the entrance to the Culsalmond village; The boundary alignment should adhere to existing community council boundaries utilising The Black Burn.

Officers have reviewed the proposed boundary adjustments and find them reasonable. However, the Council suggested a very similar division for the Fisherford catchment, this split zone option received a limited support at 24%. Should an alternative catchment be proposed for Fisherford pupils, it would require a new consultation to gather feedback from affected community members. While further exploration of this option is acknowledged, going through another lengthy statutory consultation is deemed impractical. The ongoing uncertainty surrounding the future of Fisherford School has already

had a significant impact on the community. It is hoped that this statutory consultation will provide clarity and assurance to the community regarding their children's education.

7.5 Disappointment in lack of exploration for alternative solutions and assessment of options before closure decision.

The Council's position is that alternative solutions and options for Fisherford School have been thoroughly assessed and are explained in Sections 3, 4 and 6 to 9 of the Proposal Document and Section 5 of the Options Appraisal document, where comprehensive analyses are provided to address any issues and concerns.

7.6 Concerns that if Fisherford pupils are zoned to Rayne North School, Meldrum Academy will not be their designated secondary school, causing potential detriment to pupils; Potential out of zone placements at Meldrum Academy will not grant the Fisherford pupils eligibility for school transport; Suggestion that statutory consultation on the secondary catchment area(s) rezoning is required in conjunction with this proposal.

As detailed in the Proposal Document, should Fisherford School merge with Rayne North School, Fisherford pupils would continue being zoned to Turriff Academy for secondary education, while Rayne North peers would be zoned to Meldrum Academy. Further consultation would be necessary to adjust secondary school catchment areas. The Council acknowledges this feedback and is willing to conduct further engagement on the Meldrum Academy catchment area which may result in a subsequent consultation under the Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010.

7.7 Concern that Fisherford children who were placed at Rayne North School as a result of the mothballing process will not be granted a place at Meldrum Academy.

When Fisherford School was mothballed, families attending the school were given the option to attend Auchterless, Largue, Rayne North, or Rothienorman Schools. The families were assured that, should mothballing continue, younger siblings not yet enrolled, would also secure a place at the school of choice. Further assurance was given that this would not prevent them from having a place at Turriff Academy. However, children would also be guaranteed a place at their chosen primary school's cluster Academy. The Council's position still applies for those families who had children enrolled at Fisherford at the point of mothballing.

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 6 March 2024

regarding the Council's proposal.

8.3 Education Scotland met with relevant consultees of Fisherford School, Auchterless School, Rayne North School, Turriff Academy, Meldrum 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 opportunities to work and learn alongside peers of the same stage of learning. This supports their team working and social skills.
- Fisherford children who spoke with HM Inspectors would like to see the school re-open. They liked the community atmosphere at the school and the shorter travel times. However, the children did think they would miss their friends, learning with others their own age and some learning activities if they were to move from their current schools. 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 Rayne North School or split the catchments between Auchterless School and Rayne North School. However, they are concerned about the Fisherford children would be zoned to Turriff Academy whilst the rest are zoned to Meldrum Academy.
- Rayne North children and parents/carers who spoke with HM Inspectors are strongly of the view that children currently at Rayne North School, and any younger siblings, should be able to progress to Meldrum Academy alongside their peers. Education Scotland agrees with it and recognises that the Council is aware of the requirement for a further consultation in regard to secondary catchment areas.
- 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. A few stakeholders would like the outside space to be retained for community use, such as a community orchard and play area. Some 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 Fisherford 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 acknowledges the community's concern about the future of the school building, equipment, external playground and park space. 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. In addition, 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.
- 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. In addition, should Fisherford School be merged with Rayne North School the Council will carry out a statutory consultation to realign the Fisherford School catchment with the Meldrum Cluster.
- If the proposal is agreed the Council will work with stakeholders to consider the future use of the buildings, site and any resources that remain.

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 Fisherford School and rezone to Auchterless School or Rayne North School or split the catchment between Auchterless and Rayne North Schools. None of the representations led Officers to conclude that any of these options should be reconsidered as reasonable alternatives. However, the Council assures a further rezoning consultation on the secondary catchment areas should Fisherford School be merged with Rayne North School.

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 Fisherford School catchment area.

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

11.1 Fisherford School is an accessible 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 Fisherford 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

Fisherford 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. The building was used for Parent Council meetings and Fisherford Community Association used the canteen building to hold their meetings approximately four times per year. The main school building has not operated as a community facility during the time it was operational as a school, or during the periods of mothballing suggesting that 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 7.3 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 and Rayne North Schools. This includes pupils from the Fisherford catchment.

The travel distance and travel time between Fisherford School and Auchterless School or Rayne North 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 Fisherford 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 Fisherford 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 Fisherford School on a permanent basis then one of the three options for merging Fisherford School outlined in the proposal document would also need to be chosen.

The most popular option amongst respondents was *Option 2*, to realign the Fisherford School catchment area with Rayne North School. This option is supported by 30 (73%) respondents, out of all 41 responses to the survey. It

seems that *Option 2* is strongly advocated by consultees from the Rayne North School catchment area; however, this option is also favoured by parents/carers residing in the Fisherford School catchment, as out of six, four wish Fisherford School to be merged with Rayne North School. Consultees who spoke with Education Scotland have indicated *Option 2 and Option 3* as preferred.

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 Fisherford 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 Rayne North School have the capacity to accommodate additional children. The proposal will assist the Council in delivering a "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 Fisherford School building to be used for community use if it ceases to be used as a school.
- The proposal has been strongly supported by the parents/carers, staff and community members who responded to the proposal.
- A number of pupils are already making their journey to Auchterless School or Rayne North School, some as the result of successful placing requests. Free home to school transport would be provided for all pupils from the Fisherford catchment area to attend Auchterless School or Rayne North School.

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

During the consultation period, a suggestion was made that a merger with Rothienorman School should also be considered.

The proposal was reviewed to consider whether this representation led the Council to reconsider the above suggestion as being a reasonable alternative to the proposal to close Fisherford School and rezone to Auchterless School or

Rayne North School or a combination of the two schools. Officers have determined that merging Fisherford School with Rothienorman School is not a feasible option to be reconsidered as a reasonable alternative. The Council's position has been outlined in Section 7.2 of this report.

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

During the consultation period, suggestions were made for new boundary lines across the Fisherford School catchment. The Council's position has been outlined in Section 7.4 of this report.

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 to propose only slight changes to the boundary lines that have already been put forward by Officers. The split catchment option (*Option 3*) was favoured only by 24% of the respondents. The uncertainty surrounding the future of the school has impacted the community and it is hoped that this statutory consultation to close Fisherford 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 Fisherford School.

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

This option would be to continue to mothball Fisherford 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 Fisherford 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 Fisherford children. Education Scotland has recognised that the proposal would lead to clear educational benefits for Fisherford 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 Fisherford School and re-assign its catchment to Rayne North School.**
- 14.3 Should the above recommendation be adopted, the Council will engage further on the catchment boundary for Meldrum Academy.**