

Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010

Report by Education Scotland addressing educational aspects of the proposal by Aberdeenshire Council to discontinue education at Fisherford School, which is currently mothballed and re-assigning its catchment to Auchterless School or Rayne North 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 Fisherford School, which is currently mothballed and re-assigning its catchment to Auchterless School or Rayne North 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' view. 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 6 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, Rayne North School, Turriff Academy and Meldrum 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 Fisherford 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 Fisherford School from August 2021, 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 Fisherford School ran between 5 February and 29 March 2024. The proposal was on Aberdeenshire Council's website and made available to all stakeholders. Copies of the proposal were posted to all residents within the current Fisherford School catchment area. The proposal invites stakeholders to consider three potential options. Option 1 - Close Fisherford School and merge with Auchterless School. Option 2 - Close Fisherford School and merge with Rayne North School. Option 3 - Close Fisherford School and split the catchment between Auchterless School and Rayne North School.

2.3 Aberdeenshire Council held a public meeting at Turriff Primary School on 6 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 41 individuals. The majority of responses were from parents/carers. The majority of respondents support the closure of Fisherford School. A potential merger with Rayne North School (option 2) was the most favoured option with a minority supporting that the catchment be split between Auchterless School and Rayne North School. A few stakeholders suggested other schools that should be considered as part of this consultation in regard to zoning. Pupil engagement was carried out at both Auchterless and Rayne North Schools. Children identified a range of potential advantages, such as a wider friendship group, and disadvantages such as busier playgrounds to the proposal.

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. Several families chose to send their children to larger schools prior to Fisherford School being mothballed and have not indicated that they would want to move their children were the school to re-open. Demographic data for the Fisherford catchment indicates that there is unlikely to be any substantial increase of children living in the area over the next few years.

3.2 Children and young people that HM Inspectors spoke to were able to express their views on the advantages and disadvantages of small rural schools. Those that had attended Fisherford School liked the community atmosphere at the school and the shorter travel times. 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. The children and young people HM Inspectors met, who had previously attended Fisherford School, would like to see it re-open. 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.

3.3 Stakeholders that spoke to HM Inspectors feel that practical considerations, especially which school is closer to their homes and the schools children currently attend, should be taken into account when deciding on the catchment area options. Parents/carers and staff that spoke to HM Inspectors expressed the view that either option 2, merger with Rayne North School, or option 3, splitting the catchment area, would be best if the proposal is agreed. The council state in their proposal that all existing primary age children, and their younger siblings, living in the

Fisherford area will be able to continue their education at the school they currently attend. Almost all of Fisherford School is in the Turriff Academy catchment, with a small area zoned to the Gordon schools. Rayne North School is in the catchment of Meldrum Academy. Stakeholders are concerned about a potential divide at Rayne North School if those from the Fisherford area are zoned to Turriff Academy whilst the rest are zoned to Meldrum Academy. Children, parents/carers that HM Inspectors spoke to at Rayne North School 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. Meldrum Academy is nearly at capacity. HM Inspectors agree that it is helpful for children to be able to move to the same secondary school as their school peers. Depending on the outcome of this proposal, the council is aware they may need to consider a further consultation in regard to secondary catchment areas. If the proposal is agreed, the council may need to consider the school transport arrangements for children, and their younger siblings, currently at any school which will become out of zone.

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. However, children are now used to the longer travel times. Stakeholders feel that the mothballing and potential closure of the school is a loss to the community. The school provided a venue for community events and there is no alternative venue in the village. Stakeholders are aware that the council are also consulting on closing a nearby school, Easterfield Primary School. Community Council members would like the council to consider all or part of one of the sites to be retained as a community facility and emergency centre. If the proposal is agreed, stakeholders are concerned that the building, equipment within it and the external playground and park space may be left to deteriorate. A few stakeholders mentioned that they would like the outside space to be retained for community use, such as a community orchard and play area. 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 how they ensure continuity of learning for children from the area, including as they progress to secondary school. This will include consideration of which option will be best in terms of where the Fisherford catchment area is allocated. It may also require 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 buildings, site and any resources that remain.

HM Inspectors
April 2024