

Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010

Report by Education Scotland addressing educational aspects of the proposal by Aberdeenshire Council to discontinue education at Gartly School, which is currently mothballed and re-assign its catchment area to that of either Rhynie or Kennethmont School.

April 2022

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 Aberdeenshire Council's proposal to discontinue education at Gartly School, which is currently mothballed and re-assign its catchment area to that of either Rhynie or Kennethmont 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 and then prepare its final consultation report. The council's final 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 final consultation report three weeks before it takes its final decision. Where a council is proposing to close a school, it needs to follow all statutory obligations set out in the 2010 Act, including notifying Ministers within six working days of making its final decision and explaining to consultees the opportunity they have to make representations to Ministers and the special provisions that apply only to proposals 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 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 virtual public meetings held on 25 and 26 January 2022 and the in-person meeting held on 15 March 2022 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
- virtual visits to the sites of Kennethmont School and Rhynie School, including discussion with relevant consultees.

1.4 As the proposal will lead to the closure of a rural school, HM Inspectors also took account of the council's consideration of any reasonable alternatives to closure of Gartly 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 The consultation period ran between 7 December 2021 and the 23 March 2022. The proposal was posted on Aberdeenshire Council's website. Copies of the proposal were posted to all residents within the current Gartly School catchment area. The proposal was issued to members of Parent Council's, all pupils and parent/carers of pupils currently attending Rhynie School, Rhynie Nursery and Kennethmont School. Copies were also issued to the early learning establishments within Huntly cluster. Huntly Community Council, Strathbogie Community Council and Tap o Noth Community Council were also given copies of the proposal as well as relevant users of Gartly School, local Elected Members, Area Manager, Aberdeenshire Council Human Resources and Trade Union Representatives of the affected staff. Paper copies of the proposal were posted to Rhynie and Kennethmont School as well as all residents within the Gartly catchment area. The remainder of the consultees were all emailed a copy of the proposal.

2.3 The proposal invites stakeholders to consider four potential options. Option 1: close Gartly School and merge with Rhynie School. Option 2: close Gartly School and merge with Kennethmont School. Option 3: Close Gartly School and create a shared catchment or dual zone between Rhynie School and Kennethmont School. Option 4: Close Gartly School and split the catchment area between Rhynie School and Kennethmont School.

2.4 A planned face to face public meeting on 26 January 2022 was advertised in the local press. In response to COVID mitigations, this was replaced by two virtual meetings on 25 and 26 January 2022. Notification of this change was made to stakeholders by letter or email. Amended posters were also sent to Rhynie and Kennethmont Schools and early years providers. Seven members of the public attended the virtual meeting on 25 January 2022. Two members of the public attended the virtual meeting on 26 January 2022. In response to requests from members of the public, a third, in-person, public meeting was held in Gartly Community Hall on 15 March 2022. The consultation period was extended by one month to 23 March 2022 to accommodate this request. All stakeholders were advised of this additional meeting. Thirteen members of the public attended this meeting. Overall, those attending these public meetings sought clarity about the consultation process and the council's approach to engaging with the local community.

2.5 Gartly School has not been in operation since December 2018. All staff previously based at Gartly School have been employed at other establishments. Staff within Kennethmont and Rhynie Schools have been given an opportunity to discuss the proposal.

2.6 Pupil engagement was carried out at both Kennethmont and Rhynie Schools. There are currently significantly more children from the Gartly catchment area attending Kennethmont School than Rhynie School. Children attending both schools identified a range of potential benefits to Gartly merging with either school. They value the opportunity for increased friendships and access to a range of facilities and resources. The majority of children who attend Kennethmont School favour dual zoning (option 3). They feel this would provide families with choice. They do not want the catchment area split between the two schools.

2.7 An online survey was made available to all identified stakeholders and community members. The survey ran from 7 December 2021 and 23 March 2022. A total of 31 individuals participated in the survey. The majority (68%) of responses supported the closure of Gartly School. The creation of a dual zone (option 3) was the second most favoured option (40%). A potential merger with Rhynie School (option 1) was preferred by 36.7% of respondents. Accompanying written comments include concerns about a potential lack of capacity at Kennethmont School and the significant cost required to reinstate Gartly School. The loss of this rural school on the Gartly community was also highlighted.

2.8 During the consultation period seven written responses were received by email regarding the proposal. One was in relation to school transport, another supportive of the consultation, while the remaining comments were in relation to the face to face public meeting.

3. Educational aspects of proposal

3.1 Aberdeenshire Council took the decision to decant Gartly School to Kennethmont School in December 2018 to ensure the safety of its users following the identification of an oil leak. Nursery children were decanted to Rhynie School. Considerable contamination of the site of Gartly School was discovered during remedial works. Initially, it was anticipated the situation would be resolved relatively quickly.

3.2 Despite efforts by Aberdeenshire Council to rectify the contamination, the problem remains unresolved. Public meetings were held on 5 February 2019, 23 May 2019 and 2 September 2019 to update parents/carers and the local community. These meetings were well-attended. The temporary solution was for Gartly School to operate as a separate school within Kennethmont School building. This was not suitable for a prolonged period of time. A workshop was held for parents/carers on 10 September 2019 to discuss options. Parents/carers stated their wish for Gartly School to retain its separate identity. As a result, Gartly School was temporarily relocated to Rhynie School in October 2019.

3.3 Aberdeenshire Council has outlined a number of educational benefits which it believes will result from the four options being proposed. HM Inspectors agree with some, but not all, aspects of the council's educational benefits statement. The educational benefits stated are, in some cases, too broad and generalised. In its final paper the council should outline these more clearly with more specific detail. However, despite this, HM Inspectors are confident that there is sufficient merit to consider the permanent closure of the Gartly School.

3.4 Children who spoke with HM Inspectors shared their favourable experiences of being part of Rhynie or Kennethmont School. They feel this has increased their friendship groups and increased their options when playing together. Children particularly value being able to benefit from outdoor spaces. Some liked having more children of the same age and stage. They feel this peer support is helpful during learning activities such as numeracy. Larger peer groups increase the range of options in drama activities. Gartly children currently attending Kennethmont School were strong in their opinion that they wish to remain there.

3.5 Parents who spoke with HM Inspectors were mixed in their views. Some felt the council's approach to the handling of the oil leak led to an inevitability that Gartly School would close. Others felt the financial implications of reinstating Gartly School meant the council had no option but to ensure 'best value'. Several parents identified the benefits of their child attending Kennethmont or Rhynie School. Some parents felt that the educational experience currently provided was very similar to that delivered by Gartly School prior to it being mothballed. A few parents feel that the necessity to move schools over the past few years has been particularly detrimental to children with additional support needs. Parents from the Gartly community have become actively involved in wider aspects of school life in both schools. Parents feel included in these school communities and contribute to wider school activities.

3.6 Almost all stakeholders expressed a strong desire for choice in their discussions with HM Inspectors. Their preferred option is the creation of a shared catchment or dual zone (option 3). Stakeholders also highlighted the need to consider potential capacity issues at Kennethmont School.

3.7 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. Aberdeenshire Council considered carefully if there were any reasonable alternatives to closure of the school before it consulted on the proposal. It undertook three option appraisal surveys between February and April 2021 to inform the statutory consultation process. The surveys considered seven potential options for the future of Gartly School. Those invited to provide their views included; the parents of Gartly School, all residents within the Gartly catchment area, and parents from schools in the Huntly Cluster. The views of community councils and private nurseries within the Huntly Cluster were also sought. The council used the outcome of these surveys to inform the production of the four options include in the consultation proposal.

3.8 Parents and members of the Gartly community have consistently shared their desire to retain Gartly School over the past few years. Some believe the community has already been affected by the temporary closure of the school on the grounds of health and safety. They believe the school served as the heart of the community, providing a vital link for families.

3.9 The main adverse effect of the closure of Gartly School is the extended travel time for children and families. Children living in close proximity to Gartly School miss being able to walk or cycle to school. The additional travelling time for individual children varies depending on the school transport route allocated. Travel time to Gartly School was significantly less than some children are currently experiencing. There will be no impact on the current travel times being experienced by children travelling to either Kennethmont or Rhynie School as a result of this proposal. Current travel arrangements will continue.

4. Summary

HM Inspectors are of the view that there are sound reasons for Aberdeenshire Council to consider the long term viability of Gartly School. The proposal provides clarity for the parents and the community with regard to the future education provision in the area. HM Inspectors believe that the proposal by Aberdeenshire Council has the potential to deliver overall educational benefits for children in the Gartly School catchment area. Children currently benefit from working with a larger peer group closely aligned to their age and stage.

The proposal paper indicates that Aberdeenshire Council's preferred option is for Gartly School to close and merge with Rhynie School (option 1). This is at odds with the views of many stakeholders who engaged with HM Inspectors. Their preferred option is option 3: the creation of a shared catchment or dual zone. The council should take due consideration of these views when making its final decision. Legitimate concerns regarding the capacity of Kennethmont School should also be considered. Should the decision to close Gartly School be finalised, the council should work with the community to explore future plans for the former school building and grounds. The proposal will assist the council to meet its statutory duty with respect to best value through making more efficient and effective use of its resources.

HM Inspectors
April 2022