Aberdeenshire COUNCIL

EDUCATION & CHILDREN'S SERVICES

APPENDIX 1

CONSULTATION REPORT REGARDING THE CLOSURE OF TULLYNESSLE SCHOOL

MARCH 2026

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

Contents

1 Introduction 3

2 The Consultation Process 3

3 The Proposal 5

4 Educational Benefits Statement 6

5 Public Engagement 6

6 Written Responses 9

7 Education Authority Response to Written and Oral Representations 9

8 HMIE Report 26

9 Alleged Omissions or Inaccuracies 28

10 Compliance with Section 9(1) of the Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010 29

11 Compliance with Sections 11A to 13 of the Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010 30

12 Representations to Scottish Ministers in terms of Section 15 of the Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010 33

13 Conclusions 34

14 Recommendation(s) 37

– Appendices –

Appendix A	Tullynessle School Closure Proposal
Appendix A1	SWOT Assessment
Appendix A2	Financial Template
Appendix B	Tullynessle School Options Appraisal
Appendix B1	Tullynessle Public Meeting Note – December 2024
Appendix B2	Tullynessle School Floorplan
Appendix C	Statutory Consultation Public Meeting Minutes – September 2025
Appendix D	Tullynessle School Closure Online Survey Summary
Appendix E	Tullynessle School Closure Online Survey Responses
Appendix F	Pupil Engagement - Alford Primary School
Appendix G	Pupil Engagement - Keig School
Appendix H	HMIE Consultation Report
Appendix I	Tullynessle School Place and Wellbeing Assessment

1 Introduction

1.1 This report has been prepared following a consultation on the proposal to discontinue education at Tullynessle School, which is currently mothballed (temporarily closed) and reassign its catchment area to either Alford Primary School or Keig School or to split the catchment between Alford Primary School and Keig 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 HMIE'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 HMIE;
- 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' conclusion(s) and recommendation(s).

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 22 May 2025 Education and Children's Services Committee authorised the launch of a statutory consultation regarding the closure of Tullynessle School.

2.3 The Proposal Document made clear to consultees that the consultation period would run from 1 September 2025 until 31 October 2025. This adequately covered the required minimum of 30 days term-time consultation.

2.4 On 1 September 2025, copies of the Proposal Document were distributed to:

- Parent Councils, parents, pupils and staff of Alford Primary School and Keig School
- Parents of pre-school age children living within the Tullynessle School catchment area

- Trade Union representatives of staff at Alford Primary School and Keig School
- Donside Community Council
- Local Early Years Partner Providers
- Tullynessle School catchment residents
- HMIE

2.5 A letter containing a link to the proposal on the Aberdeenshire Council website was posted to all residents within the Tullynessle School catchment area. The letter also contained a link and QR code to the online survey which was available for the duration of the proposal.

2.6 Spare copies of the proposal document and the consultation poster were provided to Alford Primary and Keig Schools, and Alford Community Campus Main Reception and Library for display at the establishment during the consultation period.

2.7 Local Early Years Partner Providers were provided with a copy of the letter to be distributed to their parents/carers and the poster to be displayed at their setting during the consultation period.

2.8 A copy of the launch poster was distributed to be displayed at Tullynessle School during the consultation period.

2.9 The Proposal Document was also published on the Council website: https://www.aberdeenshire.gov.uk/schools/school-info/education-consultations/

2.10 An online survey through the Engage Aberdeenshire platform was available throughout the consultation period.

2.11 In addition, all relevant information was published on the Engage Aberdeenshire project page. Communication regarding the consultation and public meeting was published on the Council's website, Facebook and Instagram. The consultation was also publicised on Facebook by some stakeholders.

2.12 Aberdeenshire Council's Learning Estates Team email address and telephone number were provided on all correspondence for anyone wishing to receive a paper copy of the consultation and survey.

2.13 The consultation was advertised in Deeside Piper on 26 September 2025 and it included details of the public meeting.

2.14 A public consultation meeting was held on 29 September 2025 at 6.00 pm at Tullynessle and Forbes Hall.

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, Unit 15, Harlaw Way, Inverurie, AB51 4SG.

2.16 HMIE 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 Alford Primary School, Keig Primary School and Alford Academy's relevant consultees as well as with partner and community organisations. Following their involvement, HMIE 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 3 March 2026, exactly one week before the Marr Area Committee and more than three weeks prior to the Council taking the decision on whether to implement the proposal.

https://www.aberdeenshire.gov.uk/schools/school-info/education-consultations/

3 The Proposal

3.1 The schools affected by this proposal are:

- Tullynessle School
- Alford Primary School
- Keig School

3.2 The proposal on which the consultation took place was:

To discontinue education at Tullynessle School, which is currently mothballed, and reassign its catchment to either Alford Primary School or Keig School.

3.3 The Proposal Document gave two options for realigning the Tullynessle catchment area either in full to Alford Primary School or in full to Keig School. Eight further options for realigning the catchment were discounted, and three alternatives to closure were identified as being to reopen the school with the current catchment or with an extended catchment area, or for Tullynessle to remain mothballed.

3.4 The Proposal Document stated that the Tullynessle School catchment area would be reassigned to one of the neighbouring primary schools: Alford Primary School or Keig School.

3.5 The proposed changes, if approved, would take place immediately after the conclusion of the statutory process relating to school closures.

3.6 All existing primary age pupils living within the Tullynessle 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.

3.7 The Proposal Document confirmed that all pupils within the Tullynessle catchment area would be entitled to school transport should they choose to attend the designated school.

3.8 Tullynessle School's primary and ELC provisions share the same building, so decisions about the building must consider both services. No decision on the building's future can be made until the ELC review is complete. Until then, the site cannot be declared surplus or considered for alternative use.

3.9 The options appraisal process has identified a number of alternative uses for the school. In the future, if the site is declared surplus to requirements, Aberdeenshire Council would be happy to work with the local community to explore 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 an Asset Transfer Request.

3.10 There will not be any staffing implications relating to the proposal if implemented.

4 Educational Benefits Statement

4.1 The Proposal Document included an Educational Benefits Statement, which can be read in full in Appendix A, Section 10.

4.2 The statement drew upon the wide range of learning experiences currently available to pupils at Alford Primary and Keig Schools. These include curriculum-based activities as well as a variety of extra-curricular sporting and cultural opportunities, supported by a larger parent body and a broader staff team.

4.3 Pupils at both Alford Primary and Keig will regularly work in cooperative learning groups, enabling children of similar age to collaborate effectively. If Tullynessle School was to reopen with a limited roll, group sizes would be small with little opportunity to vary group membership. Additionally, there would be no guarantee that pupils would be of comparable age or ability, potentially restricting the quality of collaborative learning.

4.4 The statement highlighted that if Tullynessle School was to reopen, 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.

5 Public Engagement

5.1 Public Meeting

All parents/carers, community members and stakeholders were invited to the public meeting to discuss the proposal, which was held at Tullynessle and Forbes Hall on 29 September 2025 at 6.00 pm.

The details of the public meeting were shared with all consultees in the Proposal Document and via Aberdeenshire Council website, Facebook and Instagram. The public meeting was also advertised in Deeside Piper.

The meeting was attended by Council officers, elected members, an HMIE representative and 17 members of the public. A full note of the meeting is attached as Appendix C.

In summary, attendees raised concerns regarding capacity at Keig School, the use of composite classes, and the potential impact on children's wellbeing. Parents highlighted issues of overcrowding and the loss of established peer groups. Questions were asked why alternative solutions such as split-site provision between Tullynessle and Keig Schools, with the reopening of the ELC, had been discounted.

5.2 Online Survey

During the consultation period, parents/carers, community members and other stakeholders were invited to complete an online survey to express their views on the proposal. The survey summarised the proposal and the identified options, and respondents were able to provide additional comments.

Of the 75 individuals who took part, 32 (43%) identified as parents/carers, two (3%) as pupils, nine (12%) as members of staff, 28 (37%) as community members, two (3%) as Community Council members, and two as "Other."

The report summarising the submitted feedback has been provided in Appendix D. Full responses have also been appended to this report as Appendix E; however, they have been redacted to prevent the identification of any individuals.

A key finding is that, among those most directly affected by the proposal, Tullynessle parents/carers with primary-aged children or younger, the majority supported both the closure of Tullynessle School and *Option 2*. Of these families, five supported the closure, four were opposed and two expressed no preference, with one of the latter commenting that closure "seems sensible considering the number of pupils and cost to upkeep the school."

Three Alford parents/carers who responded opposed the closure, for varying reasons, while Keig School families were evenly divided, with three supporting the closure and three opposing it.

When asked about the proposed closure of Tullynessle School, 21 respondents (28%) indicated support, 48 (64%) opposed the proposal and six (8%) expressed no preference.

With respect to the proposed catchment options, eight respondents (11%) supported *Option 1* (realigning the Tullynessle catchment with Alford Primary School), 37 (49%) supported *Option 2* (realigning the Tullynessle catchment with Keig School), 10 (13%) had no preference, and 20 (27%) felt that none of the identified options should proceed to consultation.

5.3 Discussion with Pupils

As part of the consultation process, Head Teachers at Alford Primary School and Keig School discussed the proposal regarding the closure of Tullynessle School and reassigning its catchment to either Alford Primary or Keig.

Pupils at both Alford Primary and Keig feel largely positive about the idea of Tullynessle School pupils joining their schools. They see clear benefits, including more friends, more learning and leadership opportunities and a wider range of support. Many are excited about welcoming new classmates, helping them settle in, and sharing their school values. Some highlighted a smoother transition to Academy.

Across both schools, some pupils expressed worries about not knowing the new pupils at first, potential differences in behaviour or values, and the possibility of a busier or more overwhelming school environment. A few were also concerned about changes to routines or classes.

Despite these concerns, the overall feeling is hopeful, friendly and welcoming. Most pupils believe Tullynessle children would settle in quickly and become part of the school community. Alford pupils would like the Council to consider future plans for the Tullynessle building, and pupils at Keig, where 15 out of 20 supported the merger and feel confident that the change could work well for everyone.

Full details of feedback received from both schools have been provided in Appendices F & G.

5.4 Staff Engagement

As Tullynessle School has been mothballed since August 2024, all staff previously based at Tullynessle have been employed at other establishments and some are no longer employed by Aberdeenshire Council. Staff within Alford Primary and Keig Schools have been given the opportunity to discuss the proposal, and they provided their feedback through the online survey. Of the nine staff members who completed the survey, the majority do not support the closure of Tullynessle School, but almost all prefer *Option 2* if the closure goes ahead. The vast majority are based at Alford

Primary School.

6 Written Responses

6.1 During the consultation period between 1 September 2025 and 31 October 2025, representations were invited from statutory consultees and interested parties.

6.2 Nine responses were received from stakeholders, some of which represented input from more than one individual. Of the nine written submissions received, two were exact duplicates and were submitted by members of the same household. Two of the nine responses were submitted just after the consultation period had closed and these were included in the overall feedback. These two responses represented four individuals. All responses have been considered and are addressed in Section 7 below, together with other submissions.

6.3 No postal responses 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's response is provided below:

7.2 Tullynessle School Nursery

Comments were received stating that the Tullynessle ELC setting should not have closed, as it was thriving and well attended. Consultees highlighted that its closure has resulted in a shortage of nursery places in the local area, requiring some families to travel greater distances to access alternative ELC settings. Some suggested reopening the ELC setting even if the school was to close. A few comments referred to the recent refurbishment of the nursery, noting that the closure was a waste of public money.

Deactivating the Tullynessle ELC setting was clearly the most significant issue raised by consultees. There was less concern about the mothballing or potential closure of Tullynessle School itself; instead, lots of feedback focused on the closure of Tullynessle ELC.

As consistently communicated during the informal engagement and throughout the statutory consultation period, the Tullynessle ELC provision is subject to a separate decision-making process. At this time, the Authority is not progressing a statutory consultation on the closure of Tullynessle ELC.

A programme of stakeholder engagement has been initiated, which will generate both generic and cluster-specific datasets. This information will be considered in conjunction with NHS birth data and admissions data to inform a decision on whether Tullynessle ELC should reopen in August 2026 or remain deactivated for a further school session.

7.3 Options and alternatives

There was a view expressed during the consultation that neither of the Council's proposed options represents a good or fair alternative for children within the Tullynessle catchment area.

Officers applied an approved methodology to the assessment of options. The methodology of the Option Appraisal process was approved in April 2021 by the Senior Leadership Team, Education and Children's Services. The Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (SWOT) approach is consistent across all changes considered for the Learning Estate. This methodology is used in other local authorities in the North of Scotland.

Officers explored potential alternative solutions and undertook a comprehensive assessment of options prior to proposing the closure. The Council's position is that all reasonable alternative solutions and options for Tullynessle School have been thoroughly assessed. This assessment is set out in Sections 3 to 9 of the Proposal Document and Section 5 of the Options Appraisal document, which provide detailed analysis addressing the issues and concerns raised during the pre-consultation engagement process.

Consultation responses included both support for and opposition to each of the proposed options. It is acknowledged that there is no ideal solution that will meet everyone's expectations. The options presented to consultees represent the best available approach, based on the evidence and data available, and are considered to most effectively support the educational interests and outcomes of the children.

There were 11 survey responses and seven written submissions to the consultation (two of the written submissions were duplicates from the same household) proposing a split model arrangement. This split model between Tullynessle and Keig Schools involved the division of primary education with Tullynessle accommodating P1–P3 pupils and Keig accommodating P4–P7 pupils, and the reinstatement of the Tullynessle ELC provision. It was suggested that this option was not adequately considered by the Council and that the split model could result in two schools operating with healthy pupil numbers.

The SWOT analysis highlighted key educational and estate-related strengths within the split model. These included the potential for improved learning spaces, continued use of both school buildings and alignment with some learning estate objectives. However, the option was discounted because its weaknesses and risks carried greater strategic and operational significance.

During the statutory consultation period, a few consultees referred to the recent merger of Foveran and Tipperty Schools as evidence that a split model could represent a viable option. However, the circumstances at Foveran and Tipperty were not the same as those being considered here. Foveran School was operating beyond capacity, with pupil numbers projected to increase, while

Tipperty School was significantly underutilised and experiencing a declining roll. The merger was therefore identified as a long-term solution to address the capacity imbalance, creating two sites with sustainable pupil numbers while supporting rural education and maximising the educational and social wellbeing of children.

Pupil roll forecasts indicate that the number of pupils attending Keig School, including those from the Tullynessle School catchment area, is expected to decline further over the coming years. Table 1 below outlines the 2025-based School Roll Forecasts for the next five years, illustrating projected pupil numbers should a split model arrangement be implemented.

Table 1 – 2025-based School Roll Forecasts

Stage	Capacity	SRF 2026/2027	SRF 2027/2028	SRF 2028/2029	SRF 2029/2030	SRF 2030/2031
P1-3	25	24	17	13	9	6
P4-7	50	24	30	28	26	27

Operating a split model between Tullynessle and Keig would result in both schools running below capacity and would not improve the long-term viability of Tullynessle School. In addition, it would weaken the sustainability of Keig School over time.

Implementing and maintaining a split arrangement under these circumstances is likely to generate ongoing uncertainty and frustration for both communities. Declining rolls would likely require a further statutory consultation in the future to address continued under-capacity issues, with the potential for pupils to be moved again, resulting in additional disruption.

At the public meeting, one consultee suggested that this option would be supported by parents/carers and that some families would be willing to transport their children if required. Responses from four individuals were received in relation to this and all clearly opposed a split model. These consultees objected to children residing within the Keig School catchment being required to attend an out of zone school, emphasising the importance of local school, the benefits of mixed-age classes, and the principle that catchment families should have priority access to their local school. Concerns were also raised about increased travel time, additional costs, and disruption to work and childcare arrangements.

These consultees further questioned the value for money of reopening Tullynessle School on a temporary basis, citing the significant additional staffing, transport, and operational costs involved, particularly in the absence of any forecast long-term growth in pupil numbers. They expressed a preference for retaining and strengthening provision at Keig School through applying some measures, such as adapting existing spaces for classroom use and the potential appointment of an additional member of staff. It was also noted that implementing a split model could result in some families choosing to

withdraw from Keig School altogether, further undermining its long-term viability. These views were also echoed by several survey participants.

While some of the above concerns mirror those expressed in opposition to the closure of Tullynessle School, it is acknowledged that Tullynessle reached this position because families within its catchment exercised their right under the Education (Scotland) Act 1980 and chose to enrol their children elsewhere, including at Keig School. It would be unreasonable and inappropriate to compromise the long-term viability of Keig School in order to extend the operation of another rural school for a limited period.

Finally, the proposed split model would be contrary to national policy and Aberdeenshire Council's Learning Estate Strategy, which seeks to ensure that the school estate is well managed, makes best use of existing resources, maximises occupancy and delivers best value from public investment.

For these reasons, the split model continues to be discounted.

A suggestion was made that the Parish of Tullynessle and Forbes boundary should be used as a school catchment area.

Officers have reviewed the Proposal Document, school roll forecasts and the relevant geographic information and do not support the use of the historic Parish of Tullynessle and Forbes boundary as a new catchment area for Tullynessle School.

The Parish of Tullynessle and Forbes boundary encloses Tullynessle village and broadly corresponds with the existing school catchment. The parish boundary extends north into the hill ground, then south across the River Don, and continues eastward toward Keig.

As outlined in the Proposal Document, Section 8, extending the Tullynessle catchment to incorporate parts of the Alford Primary School or Keig School catchments would negatively impact the sustainability of both schools, with a potentially greater adverse effect on the long-term viability of Keig School. The areas identified for potential rezoning, north of the River Don and west of the existing Keig catchment, are sparsely populated and have no large, planned housing developments. As a result, these areas would not generate additional pupils in the short or medium term.

School catchments are functional planning tools and must reflect current and projected pupil numbers, school sustainability and the efficient use of the school estate. While the Parish of Tullynessle and Forbes provides important historic and geographic context, it is not recommended to use it as a school catchment boundary.

7.4 <u>Community Impact – Loss of the school</u>

Comments were made that the school should not be closed because of its perceived role as the heart of the community, and that the loss of a rural school

risks contributing to the erosion of rural life, the long-term sustainability of the area and increasing isolation, particularly for older residents. Reference was made to the presumption against the closure of rural schools and commitment to protecting them.

The importance of schools to rural communities is fully recognised. A local school often play a central role in community life. In the case of Tullynessle School, the decision to mothball the school in 2024 was not driven by a desire to close small rural schools, nor by a lack of commitment to rural communities. It was the result of a decline in pupil numbers following placing requests to other local schools.

Data on pupil numbers shows that families are living within the catchment area, but are choosing to access education elsewhere. This indicates that families are already travelling outside the community for schooling, as well as for other essential services such as GP, dental surgeries, shops and other community facilities. This appears to be an accepted part of life within the community and reflects broader changes in how services are accessed rather than being a consequence of the school's closure.

It is also important to note that the school was not used as a community facility. There were no regular community lets of the school in recent years, and evidence shows that community gatherings and events are primarily held at the Tullynessle and Forbes Community Hall. This suggests that the community does not rely on the school building as a central point for social or intergenerational activity, and that existing community arrangements would remain largely unchanged if the school was to close permanently.

When families consistently exercise their right to attend other schools, often to access broader peer groups, curriculum opportunities and extracurricular activities, it becomes difficult to sustain a viable educational environment. Very low enrolments limit peer interaction and create challenges in maintaining staffing levels. In this context, the closure reflects changing community patterns rather than being a cause of them. Maintaining a school that families are not choosing does not, in itself, address the wider demographic and sustainability challenges facing rural areas. The decision was therefore made on the grounds of educational viability and declining enrolment, rather than as an attempt to undermine the presumption against rural school closures.

As the concerns raised regarding older residents are acknowledged, these can be mitigated by hosting intergenerational and social events at Tullynessle and Forbes Community Hall, as well as other local venues. Such activities would help strengthen community connections and reduce the risk of social isolation. In addition, children attending schools outwith the immediate community will benefit from access to wider peer groups, supporting social development and the formation of new friendships. Increased interaction between families from either Alford or Keig and Tullynessle will offer opportunities to build stronger ties between these communities.

7.5 Alford Primary School

Concerns were raised that Alford Primary School is already operating at or close to capacity, which puts additional pressure on internal spaces and congestion during drop-off and pick-up times. A comment was made that capacity pressures emerged not long after opening the new site. During the public meeting, a question was raised as to why the school was previously considered to be full, whereas it is now being described as having available capacity.

Alford Primary School opened in its current building in 2015 with a capacity of 372 and a roll of 295 pupils. At that time, School Roll Forecasts projected a peak of approximately 310 pupils by 2020. Later forecasts identified a short-term increase above those projections, mainly due to higher housing development in the area, including a rise in affordable housing units. This, and an increased number of placing requests to the school, resulted in a short-term increase in pupil numbers and associated pressures on accommodation and site.

Housing build-out rates in the area have reduced significantly since 2020. Consequently, pupil numbers at Alford Primary School are projected to decline over the medium term. Although the current school roll is 352 pupils (SEEMiS extract, 5 January 2026), 2025-based forecasts predict that the roll will reduce to 217 pupils in 2030. This reflects both local housing trends and the wider national context of an ageing and declining population in Aberdeenshire and across Scotland.

In relation to traffic concerns, it is recognised that a number of pupils from Tullynessle already attend Alford Primary School through placing requests and are transported individually by parents/carers. Should Tullynessle School be rezoned to Alford Primary, this is not expected to result in a significant increase in pupil numbers at the school. In addition, pupils attending Alford as part of a new catchment arrangement will be eligible for school transport, which should reduce individual car journeys and alleviate congestion at peak times.

7.6 Keig School

Concerns were raised that Keig School is operating at or near capacity and would be unable to accommodate additional pupils without negatively impacting space and resources. Reference was also made to the suggestion that the school would currently have 56 pupils had seven children not left. Some consultees stated that the Council does not have a plan for how to manage the capacity pressures at Keig.

Keig School has a working capacity of 50 pupils. At present, the school roll stands at 49 pupils, meaning it remains within its approved capacity. While seven pupils left the school over the past year, this was largely due to individual family or personal circumstances.

The Live School Roll Forecasts, which include P1 enrolments for August 2026, indicate a decline in Keig pupil numbers over the coming years. The roll is projected to remain at 49 pupils in 2026 and further decrease to below 40 pupils in 2029. These projections include all children from the Tullynessle catchment attending Keig School. The forecast demonstrates that any current pressure on capacity is temporary and is expected to resolve naturally over time.

A significant proportion of resources have already been relocated from Tullynessle School to Keig School, enhancing the learning environment and benefiting all pupils. Should any short-term accommodation pressures arise, these can be managed through internal school measures. The school can be reconfigured to create temporary teaching spaces if required. Class configurations can be adjusted, and team teaching approaches introduced where appropriate to ensure quality learning experiences for pupils. If necessary, restrictions will be placed on placing requests to prevent Keig from exceeding capacity.

The Head Teacher will provide regular updates to parents/carers, clearly explaining any temporary arrangements, the reasons for them, and the measures in place to safeguard educational quality and pupil wellbeing.

The Place & Wellbeing Assessment highlighted the opportunity to clarify ownership and access arrangements for Keig GP Hall.

An agreement is currently in place between the Council and the Keig Community Hall User Group (KCHUG).

A representation submitted by the Chair of KCHUG during the consultation period was supportive. The Chair highlighted that welcoming the families associated with Keig School would strengthen the Keig community and provide KCHUG with greater opportunities to engage with and include families from a wider area.

Comments were made suggesting that Additional Support Needs (ASN) are no longer being well met at Keig School due to an increased school roll, and that any further increase would result in Keig no longer being a rural school.

Additional Support Needs (ASN) teaching and pupil support staff are allocated to each school in accordance with an annual assessment of needs across the cluster. The formula for the allocation of PSA support staff is based on pupil need, school roll and deprivation.

Keig School will remain a rural school despite an increase in pupil numbers, including through a potential merger with Tullynessle School. Under Scottish Government guidance, the classification of a rural school is based on its geographical location, not its size or pupil roll.

Some stakeholders raised concerns regarding available space and storage capacity at the Keig School.

While storage limitations exist in certain areas, the proposed merger involves only a small number of pupils and is not expected to create significant operational pressure or negatively affect teaching and learning. Practical mitigation measures can be implemented, including improved space management, reorganisation of existing storage areas and provision of additional storage solutions should it be necessary.

It was noted that increased roll had a negative impact on some friendships and that it is challenging to have a bigger peer group in a small school.

Keig School is a small rural primary with a capacity of 50 pupils. In 2023, the school roll was 27. In 2024, 10 P1 pupils enrolled, and a further 7 pupils transferred following the mothballing of Tullynessle School, increasing the roll to 43 pupils that year. The current roll is 49 pupils; only a small proportion of the present school population is due to the pupils who transferred from Tullynessle School.

This increase in pupil numbers has expanded peer group opportunities within the school while still maintaining the close-knit nature typical for a rural setting. The school continues to support pupils in forming and maintaining positive peer relationships.

It was stated that rezoning Tullynessle School to Alford Primary School would remove rural families' right to choose.

If Tullynessle is rezoned to Alford Primary, parents will continue to have the right to apply for an alternative school of their choice through the out of zone placing request process, in line with the Policy.

7.7 Composite classes

Comments were made that composite classes at Alford Primary are too large and socially detrimental, with some year groups split across multiple classes. Consultees expressed concern that in Keig very small numbers of pupils from one year group are being taught alongside much larger groups from other years, which they felt is unfair and negatively impacts wellbeing. This reference was also made to younger and neurodivergent children. It was suggested that current composite class limits are driven by financial considerations rather than educational needs, with insufficient regard to classroom size, the number of year groups combined or future increases in pupil numbers.

Composite classes are not unusual in Aberdeenshire or across other local authorities in Scotland. They are a standard feature of primary education, particularly in schools where pupil numbers do not allow for single-stage classes for every year group and they are staffed based on total roll, not by year group numbers. This approach is consistent with national and local policy and is designed to make the best use of available resources while maintaining educational standards.

Under Scottish Government guidance and Aberdeenshire Council policy, schools are staffed to agreed standards based on the total number of pupils, rather than the number in each year group. Head Teachers use their professional judgement to organise classes.

Class size limits are set nationally and incorporated into Aberdeenshire's methodology for determining school capacity:

- Primary 1: 25 pupils
- Primary 2–3: 30 pupils
- Primary 4–7: 33 pupils
- Composite classes: 25 pupils

All pupils follow programmes aligned with Curriculum for Excellence and progress according to their individual levels of attainment and achievement. Teachers plan differentiated learning experiences to ensure that every child's needs are met. Schools also provide opportunities for pupils to work with their full year group during activities and events, supporting social development and inclusion.

Aberdeenshire Council adopted the Scottish Government's recommended methodology for calculating school capacity in October 2017. This approach uses a space standard of 1.7m² per pupil and considers classroom size, number of teaching spaces, and general purpose areas. It also recognises that schools with fewer than seven classrooms will typically require composite classes to accommodate all pupils within the statutory class size limits.

It was questioned how a single teacher can be expected to teach 25 children from four to 11 years old.

Across Aberdeenshire there are 12 single-class P1–P7 schools, and 11 of these are rural schools. One-class schools are therefore a common and established feature of rural education, reflecting low pupil numbers and the wide geographic spread of small communities. Staffing in schools is based on total pupil numbers, rather than being allocated separately for each year stage. Where year groups are very small, combining pupils into composite classes is necessary to ensure staff, resources and accommodation are used efficiently and sustainably.

Tullynessle operated with one composite class covering P1–P7, taught by a single teacher. If Tullynessle pupils were to merge with Keig, the combined school would continue operating with two classes, each staffed by a dedicated teacher. The pupils would be organised into smaller composite groups with year groups that are significantly closer in age and curricular stage than the P1–P7 model.

7.8 <u>School transport, traffic and road safety</u>

A comment was made that pupils will miss too much schooling in winter due to bad road conditions and the cancellation of school transport.

Aberdeenshire Council provides home-to-school transport for around 12,000 pupils daily to schools across Aberdeenshire. A number of pupils are already transported by the Authority to both Alford Primary School and Keig School. This includes pupils from the Tullynessle catchment, and some parents from Tullynessle are also transporting their children daily to schools of their choice.

The travel distance and journey time between Tullynessle School and Alford Primary School or Keig School are not considered unreasonable, at approximately 2.3 miles and 3.6 miles respectively. It is not uncommon for pupils to travel greater distances to attend school, and this pattern is particularly evident in Aberdeenshire, where the geography of the area often requires travel for primary education.

It is acknowledged that adverse winter weather can affect travel arrangements across Aberdeenshire. All roads in the area may be impacted by severe weather, regardless of whether pupils are travelling to Tullynessle, Keig or Alford Primary.

A comment was made about provision for active travel routes for children to get to school, and a potential traffic impact on Montgarrie Road, a lack of roadside provision for pedestrians and unsafe conditions walking to school.

While Tullynessle School was operational, very few pupils regularly walked or cycled to school. The majority of pupils travelling from Montgarrie were transported to school before mothballing. As a result, the closure of the school is not expected to have a significant negative traffic impact on Montgarrie Road. In fact, traffic may reduce, as pupils will be transported using local authority-provided transport rather than individual journeys by parents/carers.

Issues relating to the lack of roadside provision for pedestrians, unsafe walking conditions, and the potential for active travel routes for children were identified through the Place and Wellbeing assessment. These recommendations, including improvements to active travel infrastructure and traffic safety management, will be reviewed and prioritised in collaboration with relevant Council services.

School transport entitlement was highlighted in the Place & Wellbeing Assessment as a matter requiring clarification if Tullynessle School was to be permanently closed. Clarification was requested regarding whether younger children would be entitled to transport to Keig School, should the Tullynessle School catchment be realigned to Alford Primary School.

In the event of permanent closure, all pupils living within the Tullynessle catchment area, both new enrolments and those previously affected by the mothballing, would be entitled to school transport should they choose to attend their designated school.

Should the Tullynessle School catchment be realigned to Alford Primary School, all primary aged pupils from Tullynessle who were enrolled at Keig

School due to mothballing would be entitled to continue attending Keig School, with school transport provided. Younger siblings of those pupils would also be eligible to attend Keig School and would receive school transport.

Comments were made regarding school transport and the cost-effectiveness of the Tullynessle School catchment being zoned to Alford School, particularly in cases where families live closer to Keig School but receive transport to Alford, or where a school bus passes a pupil's home but the family is not included on that route.

Across Aberdeenshire, many children travel to schools located further from their home address. The main considerations for school transport arrangements are school catchment areas, statutory entitlement and the overall cost-effectiveness of the transport network, rather than how close a family lives to a different school.

Transport is provided to the school a pupil is zoned to attend, not necessarily the geographically nearest one. This approach ensures consistency in policy, makes effective use of existing transport routes, and avoids the need to create multiple overlapping or duplicated services.

7.9 Consideration of population and housing data

Comments were made that data on population and housing had not been adequately considered with reference that Keig School currently has 49 pupils and a very limited capacity to accommodate any increase in numbers. Concerns were raised that assumptions about falling birth rates are short-sighted, as population change is also influenced by people moving into the area, new housing developments and the natural expansion of rural communities.

Education and Children's Services publish School Roll Forecasts for all primary and secondary schools in Aberdeenshire on an annual basis, which are published on the Aberdeenshire Council website. The 2025-based school roll forecasts for each school within Aberdeenshire will be presented to Education and Children's Services Committee on 26 March 2026.

Officers from the Learning Estates Team continually monitor actual school rolls to identify and react to any deviations from the forecast as soon as possible. There are live school roll forecasts which are updated regularly and will differ from the published forecasts.

School Roll Forecasts incorporate information from the NHS regarding the number of children under school age living in catchment areas and take account of all planned housing developments. The forecasts track trends in the number of placing requests accepted in and out of each school. There are a range of other factors involved, such as birth rates, migration and pupils that do not attend mainstream schools in Aberdeenshire.

While Keig School presently has 49 pupils, this is a short-term peak and analysis indicates that numbers are expected to decline over the next few years.

There are no Masterplans or large planning applications agreed for Tullynessle or Keig and there is no confirmed evidence that proposed housing developments or properties currently for sale within the school catchment will result in a significant or sustained increase in pupil numbers. Generally, new single housing units with a very slow build-out rate would not generate enough new pupils from new housing to reinstate Tullynessle School or to oversubscribe Keig School capacity in the long-term.

While communities may expand as people move into an area, population levels can also decline significantly when families relocate elsewhere. Therefore, strategic decisions must be informed by verified data and realistic projections, rather than assumptions or speculative expectations of future growth.

One consultee suggested that the Proposal Document stated there are no planned house builds in the Tullynessle School catchment, and that this is inaccurate because there are at least 10 house plots for sale. The same individual suggested that the Council has not looked at farms selling land with permission attached.

The local planning permissions data within the Tullynessle School catchment has been fully considered in the Proposal Document, Section 9.

Additional analysis has also been carried out for the Keig School catchment. Between 2017 and 2024, three planning applications were approved. Of these, one development has been completed, while the remaining two have not yet started.

The Tullynessle catchment data shows that projected housing development will not generate enough new pupils to support the reinstatement of Tullynessle School. The Keig catchment analysis indicates very limited small-scale developments, with no agreed Masterplans or major housing proposals. As a result, if the Tullynessle catchment is realigned to Keig, no additional capacity pressure from housing is expected at Keig School.

7.10 <u>Criticism of the process, lack of discussion and communication</u>

A few comments were made that the mothballing was not discussed with the appropriate members of the community, that they felt excluded from the decision-making process, and that information from officers was not shared clearly or in a timely manner.

Mothballing is an operational decision taken in line with the Guidance for Mothballing a Primary School agreed by Education and Children's Services Committee. It is used to safeguard the educational benefits and social wellbeing of pupils when a school's roll falls to eight or fewer and is unlikely to recover in the short term. Importantly, mothballing is a temporary suspension of operations, not a permanent closure, and the school building is maintained in a "wind and watertight" condition for potential future use.

Under the Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010, mothballing is excluded from statutory consultation requirements. The agreed guidance requires an engagement process focusing on key stakeholders who are directly affected by the decision.

This engagement took place in accordance with the guidance. Staff and parents/carers of Tullynessle School were informed in person on 1 May 2024. At that time, information was provided regarding staff redeployment, pupil placement options and transport arrangements. Pupils were offered places at Alford Primary School or Keig School, with transport provided, and individual meetings were held with families to discuss personal circumstances and provide support. Families were also assured that younger siblings not yet of school age would be guaranteed a place at their chosen receiving school, with transport provision.

While wider community consultation is not required for mothballing, the Council undertook extensive pre-engagement activity following the mothballing decision to ensure the community had meaningful opportunities to engage in discussions about the school's future before any statutory consultation on permanent closure might be considered. This included:

- A public drop-in session on 2 October 2024, attended by approximately 50 community members. Invitations were issued to local residents, community representatives, councillors and officers, parents/carers, and the event was publicised on social media.
- A second public meeting on 4 December 2024, with invitations issued to the same group of consultees, attended by 12 participants. The meeting was minuted, and the minutes were published on the Aberdeenshire Engage portal.
- Opportunities for written submissions throughout the engagement period, including comment cards, email and postal responses.
- Direct correspondence issued on 3 March 2025 to all residents within the school catchment area and to parents/carers of previously enrolled pupils, inviting expressions of interest in re-enrolment.
- A further online public meeting on 27 March 2025, with invitations issued to the same group of consultees, attended by four members of the public. The meeting was minuted, and the minutes were published on the Aberdeenshire Engage portal.
- Surveys and engagement activities with pupils, parents/carers and staff of Keig School to understand the impact of mothballing.
- Place and Wellbeing Assessment, supported by community conversations, held between January and March 2025. The assessment sought to ensure that community views and feedback on the proposal were captured.

A wide range of information was shared at each engagement event. Throughout this period, information was consistently made available via the Aberdeenshire Engage portal, the Council's dedicated public engagement platform. The portal was highlighted at every engagement event and continues to be updated as new information becomes available. Further details on the engagement activity

and its outcomes can be found in the Options Appraisal document, Sections 2 and 3.

Some consultees noted that when Tullynessle School was mothballed, it was not included on the online primary admissions form and that there was not enough information publicly available. Consultees also commented that new members of the community were not aware that they could still submit an application for the school, and that there was no option provided to express an interest in Tullynessle School.

Tullynessle School was available as an option on the online Primary 1 admissions form during the mothballing period. On 13 January 2025, following a system update, the Tullynessle option was temporarily unavailable. Officers responded immediately and the option was reinstated promptly.

Following the restoration of the option, officers reviewed the admissions system and application records. Only one application was received during this time. That family was contacted directly and advised that Tullynessle School remained an available option. During the admission period there were no other applications received.

During informal engagement with the community, it was clearly communicated that Tullynessle School could reopen if sufficient interest was shown by families wishing to enrol their children, either from the catchment area or through out of zone placing requests. This position is also set out in Section 3 of the Proposal Document, which explains that the annual Primary 1 admission period takes place in January, that press releases were issued to inform families that applications could be made, and that the deadline for submitting out of zone placing requests is 15 March each year. Information about admissions was shared with the Tullynessle, Keig and Alford Primary Schools, published on the Tullynessle School website, Facebook and the Engage Aberdeenshire portal. It was also made clear that applications and placing requests would only be accepted where sufficient numbers were received to ensure viability of the school and allow it to reopen.

In order to provide a further opportunity for families to express interest, on 3 March 2025 officers wrote directly to all residents within the Tullynessle School catchment area and to parents/carers of pupils who were enrolled at Tullynessle School at the time of mothballing. This correspondence invited families to indicate whether they would wish their children to enrol at Tullynessle School, across all stages from Primary 1 to Primary 7.

Officers also received a small number of telephone enquiries regarding Tullynessle School. These calls were primarily requests for clarification about the school's status and the admissions process, and none of the families who made contact indicated a wish to enrol or return their children to Tullynessle School for the forthcoming academic year.

Despite these communications, no Primary 1 applications or out of zone placing requests have been received for Tullynessle School up to the end of 2025.

In January 2026, only two applications were received for attending Tullynessle School in the 2026/27 academic year, indicating that families intended to apply elsewhere.

A question was raised regarding why the process in relation to Tullynessle School is progressing so quickly.

As explained in the Proposal Document, Section 3, in May 2024 Tullynessle Parent Action Group (T-PAC) submitted a letter opposing the mothballing of the school and the group requested that a consultation be initiated under the Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010.

In line with Scottish Government guidance, a school is mothballed for a period of up to two years. During that time, the Council monitors pupil numbers and undertakes forward planning, before any decision is made on next steps. This approach allows time to assess whether future housing or demographic changes may lead to an increase in enrolment.

However, in this case, the request from T-PAC to initiate the statutory closure consultation altered the normal cycle of events. This was discussed at the Tullynessle School Public Engagement meeting in December 2024. During that meeting, attendees explained that the community wished to have a say at an early stage, particularly because of the desire to see the ELC provision reopened. It was also noted that there was a perception within the community that the school needed to be addressed first before consideration could be given to the ELC setting.

At that event, it was further explained that the statutory consultation process can be paused. If paused, the school would remain mothballed, allowing additional time to assess whether circumstances change. It was made clear that any request to pause the process would need to be agreed by the community as a group.

To date, no formal request to pause the statutory consultation process has been received by the Council. As a result, the process has continued in line with the request originally made and in accordance with statutory requirements.

One consultee sought confirmation whether it is part of the children's rights that their voices are heard. Some other comments suggested that children were not included in the decision-making process.

Under Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), children have the right to express their views in matters affecting them, and for those views to be given due weight according to their age and maturity. This principle is reflected in the Council's approach to engagement and decision-making.

Accordingly, during the informal engagement phase, a survey was distributed to pupils at Keig School to gather their views following the mothballing of

Tullynessle School. Children were asked, among other questions, how they felt about their current school, what they liked and disliked and how the increased school roll affected them. Further details are provided in the Proposal Document, Section 10. In addition, as part of the consultation process, the Head Teachers of Alford Primary School and Keig School held discussions with their pupils regarding the proposal to close Tullynessle School and reassign its catchment to either Alford Primary or Keig. Additional information is provided earlier in this report, in Section 5.3.

7.11 Placing requests

Comments were made that, had Alford Primary not accepted pupils from Tullynessle, pupil numbers at Tullynessle School may have remained healthier. Other comments suggested that some families chose to enrol their children in alternative schools due to management issues previously experienced at Tullynessle.

The Education (Scotland) Act 1980 gives parents/carers the right to make a Placing Request for the school of their choice other than the school which normally serves the catchment area in which they reside. Aberdeenshire Council has a duty to agree to the Placing Request unless one of the reasons set out in policy applies, which are based on legislation.

No concerns regarding the management of Tullynessle School were reported within the out of zone application forms. Analysis of the Placing Requests received shows several recurring themes. These are primarily related to sibling links, continuity of education from nursery to primary school, additional support needs, childcare arrangements and a very small school roll at Tullynessle. Some parents highlighted concerns about the very small roll, the single composite P1–P7 class and the limited availability of same-age peers. These factors were perceived by families as potentially restricting opportunities for social development, friendship formation, and preparation for the transition to secondary school.

A question was raised regarding school zoning and whether families living in the Tullynessle catchment, should it fall within the Alford Primary School catchment area, would be granted a place at Keig School if Keig remained their preferred choice.

Out of zone requests are assessed in line with the Council's Placing Request policy. Placing requests can only be approved where sufficient capacity remains after reserved places have been allocated. If the number of placing requests exceeds the available capacity, requests for places at Keig School will not be granted. As Keig School is currently operating near capacity, this may limit the availability of places for out of zone families wishing to enrol their children at Keig. This situation may change in future years, as projections indicate that the school roll at Keig is expected to decline.

Some consultees commented that families chose other schools because they needed after-school care.

It is recognised that the absence of out of school care (OOSC) in Tullynessle contributed to families seeking school places outwith their catchment. While this feedback is acknowledged, OOSC is not a statutory requirement for local authorities.

7.12 School building, site and maintenance

Comments were received expressing concern about the future of the school building, as well as the Early Years' part of the building and the potential loss of the school building.

Tullynessle School comprises both a primary school and an ELC provision. While these services are subject to separate decision-making processes, they operate within the same physical building, and this relationship must be taken into account.

No final decision can be taken on the future of the building while the review process for the ELC provision is ongoing. Any future consideration of the school element of the building must be aligned with, and informed by, the outcome of the ELC review.

However, if in the future the building was to be declared surplus to educational requirements, Aberdeenshire Council would be required to follow its Asset Disposal Policy. This includes offering the site to other Council services, assessing potential alternative uses, and where appropriate, considering Asset Transfer Requests. Officers sought community views on potential alternative uses for the building, which are outlined in the Options Appraisal document, Section 5. Many of these proposals would require partnership working with other Council services, NHS partners, or the private sector and could be explored further depending on future decisions.

Comments were made about the risk of the site deteriorating, being overlooked or demolished.

The majority of statutory maintenance and reactive repairs for the temporarily closed school building are delivered through the Council's Hard Facilities Management (Hard FM) contract, which is held by FES FM Ltd. This contract is managed by Property & Facilities Management and is funded through the Council's Repairs and Maintenance budget.

The Council recognises the importance of maintaining the building's fabric to ensure the property remains viable for potential future reopening. As part of the ongoing maintenance programme, regular weekly inspections are undertaken by the Janitorial Team, consistent with arrangements in operational primary schools. These inspections include internal and external checks of the building, routine testing of fire alarms and emergency lighting, inspection of fire doors and fire extinguishers, and the completion of light maintenance tasks such as grounds upkeep.

Clarification was requested regarding the plan for the Tullynessle School garden area. As this space was previously maintained by parents, and since the school has been mothballed, the site has not been attended to.

Responsibility for the garden remains with the parents or group who originally initiated and developed the project. If those involved wish to consider future arrangements for the space, whether maintenance, removal, or other options, this would need to be taken forward by them directly and in accordance with the Council's established procedures for any proposed works on school grounds.

7.13 Learning Estate Review

Clarification was sought on the timescale for the review of the Alford Cluster.

The Alford Cluster will be reviewed as part of the Movement Towards a Sustainable Estate programme.

At present, Phases 1 and 2 (Banff, Turriff, Westhill, Ellon, Meldrum and Mintlaw Clusters) have been completed, and officers are progressing Phase 3**,** which focuses on primary school provision within the Kemnay, Laurencekirk and Peterhead Clusters.

The remaining clusters to be reviewed are Aboyne, Alford, Banchory, Fraserburgh, Huntly, Inverurie, Portlethen and Stonehaven.

8 HMIE Report

8.1 In line with the Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010, a report was produced by HMIE on the educational aspects of the proposal.

8.2 HMIE attended the public meeting held on 29 September 2025 regarding the Council's proposal.

8.3 HMIE met with relevant consultees of Alford Primary School, Keig Primary School and Alford Academy, and with partner and community organisations.

8.4 The HMIE report is reproduced in full as Appendix H.

8.5 The HMIE report supports the proposal and is summarised below:

- HMIE agree that the proposal offers educational benefits. Children who previously attended Tullynessle School are now settled at Keig School, where they can learn alongside peers at the same stage. As Keig is also a rural school, it provides children with a similar experience to that at Tullynessle. Inspectors recognised the need for Aberdeenshire Council to balance effective use of resources with ensuring children learn in settings that reflect their local communities.

- Stakeholders raised concerns about school capacity. HM Inspectors recognised that the Council's projections show an overall decline in rolls at Alford Academy, Alford Primary and Keig Primary over the next five years. Alford Primary, with the capacity of 372, had a roll of 354 in June 2025 and is at capacity in Primary 3. Keig Primary, with the capacity of 50, had a roll of 39 in June 2025, rising to 49. Stakeholders are concerned about the effect on placing requests and non-classroom space.

- Children and young people at Keig and Alford expressed mixed views on permanent closure. They feel sad about losing a school linked to older family members, but those who moved to Keig appreciate the social and teamwork benefits of a larger roll, though they miss the Tullynessle's extensive outdoor space. If closure proceeds, they would like the outdoor area retained for community use, with equipment kept or repurposed.

- Most stakeholders believe that, if closure is approved, the catchment should transfer to Keig School, as it offers a similar rural learning experience. Some also highlighted the importance of sustaining the Keig School's viability if the roll declines as projected.

- A minority of stakeholders felt the Council did not promote the option for parents to express interest in re-enrolling children at Tullynessle during mothballing. The Inspectors noted that the Council wrote to all catchment residents and families with children enrolled at the time of mothballing to ask whether they wished to enrol for March 2025; no interest was expressed.

- Inspectors agree that travel time to Keig or Alford Primary will not increase significantly. The Council confirmed transport will be provided in line with Aberdeenshire's existing policies for pupils attending their catchment school.

- Keig Community Hall User Group expressed concerns that the Keig Community Hall, shared between the school and the community, may face pressure if a temporary third classroom is required. They stressed that changes should not undermine community activities.

- While the nursery's future is not part of this consultation, stakeholders fear that school closure reduces the likelihood of the nursery reopening. Many expressed concerns about losing access to early learning and childcare locally. Stakeholders suggested reopening of the nursery and some proposed merging Tullynessle and Keig Schools, with early stages based at Tullynessle and upper stages at Keig to ease short-term capacity pressure.

8.6 The Council welcomes the HMIE 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 capacity pressures at Keig School. The Service will implement a range of measures to ensure that the school continues to operate effectively and that the needs of all pupils are fully supported.

  In line with established procedures, the Service will work closely with the Head Teacher to explore and apply approaches that maximise existing resources. This may include reviewing class configurations, considering opportunities for team teaching, and using a general purpose space within the school that could be used flexibly to support learning and teaching.

  The Service will also manage placing requests carefully and in accordance with the Council's Placing Request policy. Placing requests will only be approved where sufficient capacity is available after reserved spaces have been allocated. Should the number of placing requests exceed the remaining available places, placing requests will not be granted.

- The Council will continue to work closely with schools to plan for any necessary adjustments to class structures or accommodation. Should a temporary third classroom be required at Keig School, the Council will work with school and community members to minimise any negative effects on shared space.

- Should the proposal be agreed, the Council will take forward the Inspectors' recommendation to explore options for retaining outdoor space for community benefit. The Council will work closely with stakeholders to consider the future use of the building, site and any resources that remain.

- The Council acknowledges the Inspectors' view that maintaining a range of school types across the wider area is important. This consideration will be reflected in the final decision-making process.

- The Council acknowledges the concerns raised regarding the future of the Tullynessle ELC provision. As noted, the nursery falls outwith the scope of this consultation. However, the Council accepts the Inspectors' recommendation to clearly communicate plans for future engagement on the ELC provision and to fully involve stakeholders in discussions about the nursery's future.

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 have 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 the final Consultation Report.

9.3 Two errors were identified in the Proposal Document issued to consultees on 1 September 2025. The document incorrectly stated that a copy of the proposal was available at the Marr Area Office, which is no longer operational. In addition, the document contained an incorrect date for the public meeting, indicating it would take place on 23 September 2025 instead of the correct date, 29 September 2025.

9.4 Both errors were identified on the first day of the statutory consultation period. All consultees were immediately informed of the corrections. The online versions were updated and establishments that had been provided with spare copies of the Proposal Document were contacted and asked to amend the copies they held to reflect the accurate information.

9.5 One comment from the online survey suggested that the Keig School roll figure was incorrect in the proposal document. The school roll figure quoted in the proposal is subject to change and was accurate at the time of preparation.

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 Tullynessle School and rezone to either Alford Primary School or Keig School. Upon careful consideration, none of the representations led Officers to conclude that any of these options should be reconsidered as reasonable alternatives.

10.6 The educational benefits were reviewed in respect of the HMIE report and representations made. There were no factors included in the HMIE 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 remains the best solution to provide appropriate and effective education provision for children residing in the Tullynessle School catchment area.

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

11.1 Tullynessle School is a 'remote rural school', and the Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010 requires the Authority to have special regard to the following factors:

- The likely effect on the local community in consequence of the proposal; and
- The likely effect caused by any different travelling arrangements that may be required in consequence of the proposal.

11.2 As Tullynessle 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. Before 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.

11.3 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, Proposal Document and in Section 7 of this report. As part of the consultation, a Place and Wellbeing Assessment was undertaken in 2025, which involved discussions with stakeholders from wider communities as well as various partners within Aberdeenshire Council. The report and all recommendations can be viewed in full in Appendix I.

11.4 The Place and Wellbeing Assessment identified that the closure of Tullynessle School may have social, economic and wellbeing consequences for some members of the community.

11.5 The recommendations have been shared with relevant Aberdeenshire Council services, partner organisations and community groups who have roles in shaping the future of education and community provision in the area. These teams will review the recommendations and assess which actions can be taken forward. The assessment provides a structured basis for planning, partnership working, and continued engagement with the Tullynessle and Keig communities.

11.6 The Council recognise that schools are more than buildings, they are part of community identity. However, the primary purpose of a school is to educate children. Where inequalities arise from changes in provision, these should be mitigated through other services and community-led initiatives, as recommended by the Place and Wellbeing Assessment.

11.7 Aberdeenshire Council's statutory duty is to ensure that education provision serves children effectively and sustainably. As defined by the Scottish Government, a school is an institution that provides structured education to enrolled pupils under the Education (Scotland) Act 1980. A school cannot exist without children attending it, and pupil numbers are the fundamental measure of viability.

11.8 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.

11.9 The likely effect on the local community

<u>Loss of the school as a focal point for the community</u>

Members of the community mentioned the loss of the school may impact on the elderly population as the school was a focal point for some community events and intergenerational activities. Concern was raised about how that common link would be maintained if the school is permanently closed. Tullynessle, however, does benefit from a well-organised and fully functional Tullynessle and Forbes Community Hall, a short distance from the school, which also serves as a focal point for community functions.

Tullynessle School has been mothballed since 2024 due to a falling roll. The data on pupil numbers indicated that families were 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 period of operation, the school did not provide breakfast or after-school clubs. The building was used on one occasion during the 2023/24

academic year for a Parent Council meeting. The main school building has not functioned as a community facility while in use as a school, indicating that the community does not rely on it as a public resource. Instead, the Tullynessle and Forbes Community Hall is widely used by the surrounding communities for a variety of gatherings.

If the proposal is approved and the catchment area is reassigned to either Alford Primary School or Keig School, it will be important for the community of Tullynessle to be included in future school events.

Further information on the likely effect on the local community has been set out in Section 7.4 of this report.

As highlighted in the HMIE report, children and young people noted that they miss Tullynessle's extensive outdoor space and expressed a desire for the outdoor area to be retained for community use. They also stated that they would like existing equipment to be kept or repurposed if the decision is made to close the school. This feedback has also been captured through the Place & Wellbeing Assessment, which provided several recommendations to help mitigate any negative impacts on the community.

Use of the building after permanent closure

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 7.12 of this report.

There is interest in exploring future community use of the school building. Discussions with community members during the Place & Wellbeing Assessment informed several recommendations.

11.10 The likely effect caused by different travelling arrangements

Travel arrangements

Aberdeenshire Council provides home-to-school transport for around 12,000 pupils each day. Pupils from the Tullynessle catchment area are already transported to Keig School as part of existing arrangements.

The travel distance and journey times between Tullynessle and either Alford Primary School or Keig School are not considered unreasonable. Many pupils across Aberdeenshire travel similar or greater distances due to the rural geography of the area.

Closing Tullynessle School would not increase current journey times, as pupils are already travelling to alternative schools. For pupils living in the Tullynessle catchment and attending either Alford Primary or Keig School, the additional travel time compared with attending Tullynessle School is no more than seven minutes under normal conditions. For some pupils, the increase is smaller, or

even results in a shorter journey, depending on their home location.

In the future, the number of individual journeys made by parents/carers is expected to reduce. This is because all children living in the Tullynessle catchment area will be eligible for transport to their designated school, in line with the school transport policy.

Additional information on the likely effect caused by different travelling arrangements was set out in Section 12 of the Proposal Document.

Recommendations were also proposed as part of the Place & Wellbeing Assessment.

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 environmental impact associated with the travel arrangements for Tullynessle pupils is minimal, given the very small number of children involved and the short distances they travel. Any additional emissions from school transport will be more than offset by the closure of an outdated and under-utilised school building, which currently requires heating, maintenance, and servicing despite low pupil numbers.

Furthermore, moving pupils onto school transport rather than relying on individual car journeys by parents/carers will reduce the number of separate trips being made. This will result in a more efficient travel pattern for the catchment, with a reduced environmental footprint.

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 30 April 2026. 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 20 May 2026.

12.6 Anyone wishing to make a 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 Review of the oral and written submissions to the formal consultation, along with the survey results, shows that while there is a strong stakeholder opposition to the proposal to close Tullynessle School, there is also a degree of support.

13.2 Feedback indicates that many respondents who opposed the proposal were particularly concerned about the primary school closing for the purpose of reopening the ELC provision.

13.3 Officers have carefully considered the opportunities, issues and challenges identified by stakeholders during both the informal engagement and formal consultation processes.

13.4 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.

13.5 Each option is discussed below.

(a) Adopt the proposal

If the Council chooses to adopt the proposal and close Tullynessle School on a permanent basis, then one of the two options for merging Tullynessle School outlined in the Proposal Document would also need to be chosen.

The most popular option amongst respondents was *Option 2,* to realign the Tullynessle School catchment area with Keig School. This option is supported by 37 (49%) respondents, out of all 75 responses to the survey. Many felt that Keig, as a small rural school with similarities to Tullynessle, would provide a more natural transition and reduce disruption for pupils. Some respondents saw the merger as an opportunity to keep Keig viable in the long term. Op*tion 2* received the highest level of support, particularly from families in the Tullynessle and Alford catchments, and it was also favoured by a number of staff and community members. Respondents referenced a range of considerations, including school capacity, travel implications, continuity for children, and the long-term sustainability of rural education provision. The majority of stakeholders who met with HM Inspectors also indicated *Option 2* as their preferred option.

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 and team events will be increased. The projected numbers of children within the Tullynessle 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. 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 HMIE 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 Tullynessle School building to be used for community use when it ceases to be used as a school.
- A number of pupils are already making their journey to Alford Primary School or Keig School, some as a result of successful placing requests. All pupils living in the Tullynessle catchment area who are affected by the proposed changes will be provided with free home-to-school transport to

attend either Alford Primary School or Keig School.

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

During the consultation period no suggestions were received from stakeholders that would require a minor amendment to the proposal.

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

During the consultation period, two suggestions were put forward:

- To establish a split-site model between Tullynessle and Keig Schools, including reinstating the ELC provision at Tullynessle; and
- To create a new catchment area for Tullynessle School aligned with the Tullynessle and Forbes Parish boundary.

Officers have fully considered both suggestions. After the assessment, it was concluded that neither proposal should be taken forward. The rationale for this decision is set out in Sections 7.2 and 7.3 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 another 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. The uncertainty surrounding the future of the school has impacted the community, and it is hoped that this statutory consultation to close Tullynessle School will give clarity to the community and a sense of certainty regarding their children's education.

Having reviewed the HMIE 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 Tullynessle School.

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

This option would be to continue to mothball Tullynessle 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 Tullynessle 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 Tullynessle children. HMIE has recognised that the proposal would lead to clear educational benefits for Tullynessle pupils.

As current evidence indicates that the school is highly unlikely to re-open, a new statutory consultation will be required at a future date to consider permanent closure.

14 Recommendation

14.1 **The recommendation of the Officers is that the Council should adopt the proposal to permanently close Tullynessle School and reassign its catchment to Keig School.**

14.2 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 14.1 is the most reasonable, appropriate, sustainable and viable option.