Aberdeenshire COUNCIL **Education & Children's Services**

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Tullynessle School Public Engagement
Tullynessle and Forbes Community Hall
Wednesday 4 December 2024, 5.00 pm

Aberdeenshire Council Officers: Maxine Booth (Quality Improvement Manager), Rachael Goldring (Learning Estates Team Leader), Matthew Smart (Shaping Places for Wellbeing Community Link Lead), Anna Zadka-Labus (Learning Estates Officer, minutes), Deborah Masson (Quality Improvement Officer).

Around 12 members of the public attended the meeting.

Welcome

Maxine Booth welcomed everyone to the meeting. Max informed that the meeting will be minuted, and the minutes will be available on the Engagement HQ Platform.

Background

Maxine Booth - In May 2024, the Director of Education & Children's Services decided to temporarily mothball Tullynessle School at the start of the new term in August 2024. This decision was based on mothballing criteria approved by the ECS Committee in October 2021.

On 7 May 2024, the Tullynessle Parent Action Group submitted a letter opposing this decision and requested that the Council move directly to a statutory consultation on the school's closure.

Subsequently, on 29 August 2024, the ECS Committee instructed officers to commence the pre-engagement stage of a statutory consultation under the Schools (Consultation)(Scotland) Act 2010 to explore the permanent closure of the school. This process includes an options appraisal to determine the best course of action.

It is essential to emphasise that any potential closure consultations for the primary school and the Early Learning and Childcare (ELC) setting will be conducted separately, as ELC settings do not have catchment areas. Today's discussion is focused solely on Tullynessle Primary School, P1–P7.

Early Learning and Childcare

Maxine Booth - ECS Committee will be considering a report on the mothballing/deactivating Early Learning and Childcare (ELC) settings on Thursday 5 December which provides guidance on the scenarios, assessment and process for mothballing/deactivating an ELC setting. The future of Tullynessle ELC setting will be considered separately through review of the Alford cluster delivery model and capacity to ensure any proposals regarding the future of Tullynessle ELC are informed by key data on local births, uptake, staffing and local need and priorities. Further information regarding next steps will be communicated in 2025.

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School information

Maxine Booth - Tullynessle School is part of the Alford Cluster, consisting of 13 primary schools within the catchment area for Alford Academy.

School roll and School Roll Forecast

Rachael Goldring - The school roll has declined steadily, from 21 pupils in 2018 to 13 in 2023. At the start of the 2024/25 session, the roll was to drop to 8 pupils, including one potential out-of-zone request. This was due to parents submitting placing requests out of the school.

The school roll forecast shows a decrease in the roll at Tullynessle School in future years. There are no housing developments within the catchment area for the foreseeable future.

At the time of mothballing 2023 Live School Roll Forecast for Tullynessle School projected that there would be 8 pupils on the roll from 2024 until 2026, and 6 pupils from 2027.

Tullynessle 2024 Live School Roll Forecast shows that if the school reopens and all former pupils reenrol at the school, there will be 7 pupils on the roll in sessions 2025 and 2026, 5 pupils in 2027 and 3 in 2028.

For the school to become operational again there needs to be sufficient pupils on the roll to make educational experiences viable and to ensure that pupils receive the entirety of the broad curricular entitlements that the local authority is expected to provide to children.

Any parents of P1 children for August 2025 should still apply for the school during the admissions period in January 2025 and placing requests from other schools will also be considered.

Community Engagement

Rachael Goldring - The pre-engagement stage is an essential part of ensuring all relevant stakeholders have the opportunity to provide input before we advance to the formal statutory consultation process. As we move forward, once sufficient information has been gathered, we will proceed with the statutory consultation.

The first community pre-engagement event, held on 2 October 2024, covered both primary and nursery provisions. It was attended by 47 individuals, with much of the interest focused on the ELC setting.

Suggestions and alternatives

Rachael Goldring - One of the options identified as part of the appraisal is to close the school. We welcome your suggestions for alternative options. As a rural school there is a presumption against closure and Aberdeenshire Council must ensure all other alternatives have been identified and robustly considered prior to undertaking any statutory consultation on this matter.

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If closure is assessed as the only viable option for the school, then Aberdeenshire Council must undertake a statutory consultation under the Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010.

Comments can be shared tonight using the comment cards provided or emailed to LearningEstates@aberdeenshire.gov.uk. The deadline for submitting suggestions is **5.00 pm** on **31 December 2024.**

Place and Wellbeing Assessment

Matthew Smart - The real-life impact on the community will be evaluated through a Place and Wellbeing Assessment, conducted in collaboration with community members and key stakeholders. This evidence-based assessment is intended not only to address any unintended consequences of the proposal but also to strengthen the aspects that lead to positive outcomes for the community. It will focus on evaluating the effects of the mothballing of the school and nursery, as well as the potential closures, on the community.

Questions

Maxine Booth - We will now open the floor for questions. Please introduce yourself and your role or interest in the school (e.g., parent, pupil, staff, community member).

Attendee - I am aware of at least three planning housing applications in the area, as opposed to what was just said.

Rachael Goldring - there are no allocated housing sites, but that doesn't stop people from preparing individual applications for a house, but there's no planned strategic housing development.

There was a discussion that there is a site with around 13 plots for sale, and this potential housing would be within the Tullynessle catchment zone. There will be more houses going to be built. There was further discussion about available plots in the area, and Coldwells Builders and their links.

Rachael Goldring - we have not seen any planning applications for houses in this area, but we will check that.

Discussion took place about potential housing increasing possible roll at Tullynessle but also hugely increasing the pressure on Keig School, which currently has 43 pupils.

Attendee - I would like to know, if houses are being built in the area, what will happen with the Keig School capacity? Will there be space for younger siblings?

Maxine Booth - yes, if Tullynessle remains mothballed. Part of the statutory consultation and options appraisal is to know where the boundary line should be drawn. Parents and community will have their say about where this line should be drawn. Whenever a school is closed, it is assigned in whole to one school or it can be divided between different schools. But that is determined through discussion with the community about where they wish it to go.

Attendee - it cannot be short sighted. When nursery was mothballed the Early Years Manager said that the process around mothballing the nursery was the capacity. It wasn't

child focused. It doesn't have to work just because there is more space at Alford that in Tullynessle School, as people move to these communities because they want rural schools.

Maxine Booth - that's right. A while back, when we rezoned of Westhill area, Skene School community didn't want new houses to be in their catchment, because they didn't want the school to grow bigger, they wanted a small, rural school. Parents have that choice about choosing a small scale school over a bigger school.

Attendee - do you have projections for Keig for next year, assessing Tullynessle numbers?

Maxine Booth - we have combined school roll forecast for Keig and Tullynessle, which was discussed with the Head Teacher. Next year there will be a small number of Tullynessle pupils going to Keig School.

There was discussion about Keig School capacity and possible tight roll and other families choosing schools out of their own catchments, wanting to go to Keig School.

Rachael Goldring - we would be monitoring the numbers, for example, people from Alford catchment and people from Tullynessle catchment wanting to go to Keig School, and if the capacity at Keig is too tight those requests from other schools than Tullynessle would be refused.

Maxine Booth - we prioritise out of zone placing request in line with the policy. Tullynessle children would have entitlement to a place at Keig School, if any spaces are available, they could go to other families. But we may keep this school only for Keig and Tullynessle children. When schools reach capacity, we first look at reconfiguration of the spaces and we consider any new housing in the area, we may even cap a school. But this is not what data for this area states.

Attendee - but if there's 13 houses built in the area?

Maxine Booth - for rural schools, one family can have a big impact on the situation. For Tullynessle, the data we hold does not evidence the numbers rising again and we do not want to reopen the school it to be mothballed again. Currently, the numbers are not there. If new housing is going to be built, we would ask if anyone wanted to come back. Even if they all did, the numbers do not show the school to be viable. It is a big decision to mothball a school, and we don't want to reopen it to close again, because that's disruptive for the children.

Attendee - what the council's definition of what viable is?

Maxine Booth - a viable is a school that remains above eight pupils.

Attendee - Tullynessle School was thriving, there were eight pupils but it was mothballed.

One attendee described her family situation following the nursery mothballing. There is not childcare availability in Alford on the days her family requires. Mothballing the nursery has badly affected her family and their life.

Maxine Booth - I understand, but this meeting is about the primary school, P1 to P7 stages. However, we can take your comments to the Early Years Team. There's a paper about

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deactivating nurseries going to Education & Children's Services Committee tomorrow. Following the committee's decision, it will then go forward and there'll be information shared. But you can write down your comments and these will be transferred to Early Learning and Childcare officers.

Matthew Smart - the wellbeing assessment will be looking at unintended consequences of mothballing the school and unfortunately the nursery goes along with it. Everyone who wants to discuss the nursery, please talk to me. This assessment is about the school, but there is a lot of cross collaboration between different departments. While Early Years Team states they are very distinct and very separate, with my role in this process and information I hold, I may feed into their process moving forward. Contacting me individually or as a group will allow me to capture lots of information about different aspects of mothballing the school.

Maxine Booth - a few years ago we had to mothball a school and after speaking with the community we found out that, what was not our intention, the mothballing had a big impact on the older people in the community who benefited from the school being there, for example: nativities, Christmas cards or harvest teas. We work alongside Matthew, because we understand how place is important, and schools are obviously central to that. But we can't have a school without children. We want to know more about how we can work with communities to make sure that things are continued.

Matthew Smart - some information is not in the data hold by the Council or is not up to date, so speaking with communities we know what is going on there.

Maxine Booth - generally a school is mothballed for up to two years, and while it is mothballed, we start planning the next stages. This is in line with the Scottish Government guidelines. However, Tullynessle Parent Action Group requested for us to initiate the closure statutory consultation. But this can be paused, you will need to decide as a group. If paused, the school will remain mothballed and it will give us a couple years to see what happens next, if any new houses will generate any children. There is another community we currently work with, and when we suggested that we should go straight to merger with another school, because there's no data suggesting that there's going to be more children to make their school viable. And they asked to allow them two years to see they can generate children or get children to come to their school. That's still an option for Tullynessle.

Attendee - we pushed for the consultation to happen because we wanted to have a say 'now', because of the nursery. If it was just the school we could say let's pause it, but there is a need for the nursery to reopen. So, the aim was to deal with the school first, as we heard the school comes first, and then focus on the nursery.

Attendee - the community felt completely unheard and not acknowledged by Director of Education, Education Committee Chair and local Councillors. No officials came to meetings we organised. Meetings during mothballing were not minuted. So that's why we pushed, not even just because of the decisions, but the way people and parents were treated. We wanted a statutory consultation, where things will be noted and structured.

Maxine Booth - mothballing a school is an operational decision, we talk to affected families and parents. Now you can decide if you want the school mothballed or go to the statutory consultation. At the initial meeting regarding mothballing many parents stated that they would not be enrolling their P1 children for August 2025 at Tullynessle School.

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Attendee - the biggest issue was that the school went from two to one class. And there was no chance of making it two classes again, because the nursery was put into the school. As a parent, do you want your child in a small school one to seven, or a bigger school. Keig school is fantastic to us and now we are losing some of the things we like about Keig, because there is so many children on the roll.

Maxine Booth - Keig School had large P1 intake, so the increased roll is not only due to the Tullynessle children. The reasons why the nursery moved into the school building, was because none of the data said that the numbers were going to rise. Families often move their children out of a school when it goes from two classes to one as some parents don't want siblings to be in the same class.

Attendee - the letter about 'schools with a roll of 75 or less pupils' issued in November, feels like you're putting the target on these schools. There are 32 children zoned to Tullynessle, so we're not vulnerable. This letter to me says that we are being watched. Also, at the time there was no consultation with Tullynessle families about making the school one class school.

Maxine Booth - there are 32 children in the area but they are not attending the school, they chose to go somewhere else. Also, there was no consultation at the time to go from a two class to one class school, because it is an operational decision. There is a formula used across all authorities - the number of children equals the number of teachers.

There was a discussion about a danger that all schools with a roll of 75 or less pupils are going to be closed.

Maxine Booth - across Scotland, there is a pupil population decline and at the moment we have 8000 spare primary places in our schools. We've got too many schools, and they're not full. The letter was issued to make people aware. Even our largest schools in urban areas up to 500 places are now declining to the roll of near 300. We also have to think about condition and suitability of our schools. With too many schools, we are spreading everything across all schools, staffing, resources, money to maintain the buildings. We need to think about the best learning environments for our children, it doesn't make sense to try and keep all of our schools open when they are not viable. We value rural education, but rural education is about education, it is about a place and not about a building.

Attendee - how the community can let you know that we want the school open. It is important for people to know that they can still apply for the school, especially with the new houses.

Maxine Booth - following this evening we need to make sure that people who aren't here tonight know. And we need to ask for alternatives to closure. Keeping the school open for eight children isn't an option. The school needs a viable number of children for a viable length of time, so that it gives reassurance to the community that it is going to be viable again and won't close again.

There was a discussion about possibility of having a nursery without a school.

Maxine Booth - tomorrow the committee is going to speak about deactivation/mothballing of nurseries and depending on what's decided that will be actioned in 2025 and you can then ask your questions.

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There was a discussion about Tullynessle parents choosing different school, and their right to do so.

Deborah Masson - in response to how can we provide opportunity for families to say that they would like to go to Tullynessle. Rachael said that in January you would be able to say you wanted a place at Tullynessle. And as a QIO I will make it really clear at Alford and Keig that the Head Teachers share this information that it is possible to still make an application to Tullynessle.

Maxine Booth - out of zone children who would wish to come back to the school would also be allowed to do so.

Rachael Golding - in January a letter to all residents will be sent to advise how many potential primary ones indicated an interest in enrolling at the school, and if we were to reopen the school, would you be interested on re-enrolling. Or do you know of a child who would want to come back. New houses will also receive this letter. We would also accept placing requests from other areas.

Maxine Booth - If we had 10 children that were out of zone that wanted to come back, that would make the school viable. Out of zone deadline is 15 March, by then we will know how many in zone children could enrol. It would apply to any year group. The community can also get the message out.

There was a discussion about proceeding with the statutory consultation and that the community feeling is that they were not heard and the children are not represented.

Mathew Smart - with my involvement we can go back to the table and you have an opportunity to be heard here.

Deborah Masson - I didn't know that we have a nursery without a Head Teacher, but I know we have other scenarios where the nursery is in a separate building. Following committee tomorrow, it is something I think can be discussed with families.

There was a discussion about nurseries without a Head Teacher and stand-alone nurseries.

Attendee - is it possible to make one school P1 to P3, and another school P4 to P7?

Maxine Booth - tomorrow night we have a meeting where we are proposing that. One school is going over capacity and the other school is dropping lower than eight. We are proposing a merger, and one school would be an infant school and the other a junior school, using this terminology. Some parents are supporting this proposal and others are opposed as they don't want their children to be split up. But there are educational benefits to it. We have been working with children, parents and working groups. If this is what you want, we will do options appraisal for that and we will share it with you. A decision needs to be made if you wish to pause the statutory consultation and continue mothballing to see if the new houses will be built and if they will generate any children? Within a year you can think of other options, do we want a nursery, or do we want Keig School to split.

Attendee - there was a Braemar Head Teacher overseeing Ballogie Nursery since the Finzean head teacher is at Alehousewells so it is an option. But if it is a child protection

issue, how are those children different from ours? Talking about child protection and taking children out with their communities - the Head Teacher at Towie asked for an address for my son, in case of a snow day. I couldn't give that address because that is not our community. That is the biggest child protection issue for me, and this needs to be considered. That hasn't been thought for rural schools at all. And very likely it is going to happen that I won't be able to get to my four year old son because of snow.

Maxine Booth - yes, and it is across our schools within their own zone areas.
This conversation doesn't end today. We will continue. But start thinking about other options and alternatives, get the message out to people who are not here tonight, and share the other options with us. The minutes will be shared on the Engagement HQ website.

Attendee - if the statutory consultation process is stopped, how can we get these ideas brought forward to the table?

Maxine Booth - this is a pre-engagement before the actual statutory consultation and pre-engagement can go on two years, until we have the best option liked by the community and then we can try to do that, for example, if you want to use the Tullynessle building to be just a nursery, then you can't have the schools in that, and the school would need to be closed through the statutory consultation.

Attendee - Keig School needs help with the influx of numbers.

Deborah Masson - that has already started following the last meeting. But I can engage further following this evening.

Maxine Booth - during the drop-in session in October I spoke with concerned parents and passed that on to Deborah. But we need to remember, at Keig it wasn't just down to the Tullynessle children, it was large influx of P1 pupils.

Attendee - but the process was too quick and teachers didn't have a chance to get to know the children.

Maxine Booth - that's why we listened to the parents, I was speaking with parents at the last meeting as I wanted to find out what the experience was like for them and the children. I hear from parents that were moving to Keig and those who were already at Keig. We want to know what we could do better. We have learnt a lot since 2013, but communities want different things, you want a statutory consultation, and another community want to be mothballed.

Attendee - we wanted to go to statutory because we were ignored. Our local Councillors didn't communicate with us. Director of Education ignored us, only one ward Councillor turned up to feedback everything we have said to the Director, and we know that through Freedom of Information request. We didn't see the others either. The statutory consultation would allow us to have a voice. Nobody engaged with us in a respectful way, and we want to feel heard or valid.

Maxine Booth - and this is what tonight is about, we want to keep these conversations ongoing. It is an official channel. We don't just leave communication after mothballing, we need to keep engaging. It can be done through email, online, or face to face, with parents,

children and other interested groups. We want to know the voice of the community and this is when Matthew comes in.

Attendee - who is looking after the building, with the heating turned off, potential burst pipes. In the future, if the school is to be opened, will it actually be maintained?

There was discussion about maintaining the building and outdoor areas and protecting the fabric of the building.

Maxine Booth - Property have a maintenance programme in place, and we will liaise with Property colleagues to give you more details. However, if we decide that we've got enough children to reopen the school, it's not going to happen within a day, it would be a process making sure the building and grounds are fit for purpose.

Attendee - if you did have enough children, when would the school open?

Maxine Booth - the usual process would be P1 admissions in January and out of zone applications with the deadline of 15 March, so we would be looking at August start.

Attendee - a Tullynessle child who is to start P1 next summer, which school would they be zoned to?

Maxine Booth - they would have to apply for Tullynessle, if this is what they want, if not, they can apply for Keig of Alford Schools.

Rachael Goldring - they can choose any school, but Keig of Alford are nominated schools and they would get transport to those schools.

Attendee - how long does the statutory process take?

Rachael Goldring - a statutory consultation must run for 30 days term time, but we usually run it for two months, because of in service days or bad weather days, so from start to finish, it's about nine months, because there are various government stages that it needs to go through.

There was a discussion about whether a statutory consultation should be launched or not or whether it should be launched for the school or for the nursery only. Opinions varied. There were voices that the community no longer trusted the Council.

Maxine Booth - we're going to have to build that trust back, because this is an important process that we need to get right and we need to do that together to get it right.

Matthew Smart - the Council has many departments and somebody said that they emailed the Learning Estates, and half the Learning Estates Team is in this room. So, when you email the Learning Estates, they will answer as it is a very small team.

Further discussion about broken trust and local Councillors not being present at tonight's meeting took place.

Maxine Booth - we are always trying to be reflective and we want to get it right. Nobody wants to lose their school, but you need children to have a school. From our point of view,

we want the right outcome at the end. We want to get it right for Tullynessle community, carers and also Early Years. And the Early Years' paper will be presented tomorrow. And whatever is decided tomorrow, this process will be activated for all areas across Aberdeenshire, including Tullynessle.

Attendee - why do you have to decide now whether to stop the statutory consultation process or not?

Maxine Booth - once it's launched, we are in it. We produce proposal, we have a 30 day term time consultation, then a decision is made, and then potentially school permanently closed. If we go ahead with the statutory consultation, we will launch it before the summer. We wouldn't have this pre-engagement if it hadn't been requested by Tullynessle Parent Action Group. That's why we've been having pre-engagement sessions.

Attendee - that should've been made clear earlier.

Attendee - it should've been mapped out in May, during mothballing.

Maxine Booth - that's why we had the drop-in session in October, and we had the timeline.

Attendee - it was too late, we should've been explained how this process looks like at the time when the school was mothballed.

Maxine Booth - we did it separate because it could've been too much information on top of the mothballing. But I've acknowledged what you have said.

Attendee - you are watching the school rolls over time, so why somebody didn't say, there 37 children in this area but they are choosing not to go to the school? There must be reason for that.

Maxine Booth - we know the reasons that people write down on placing requests. They don't have to give their reason as to why they are applying for an out of zone placement, but when they do, we have to take that as being their true reason. We know the range of reasons why people choose other schools.

Attendee - so you just sit there watching a school go downhill and do nothing.

Maxine Booth - if a parent put on their application that they want to leave because they were not happy about X, Y and Z, then we would report it to the Quality Improvement Officer and they would have a discussion with the school. Tullynessle was not expected to go that route; however, there were number of families moved at the same time.

Deborah Masson - we can only do so much as an education authority. We can't fix everything, like relationships within the community. But I can work with the school to improve the quality of the education. It depends on how openly you share real reasons with the right people. Sometimes I get feedback during my engagement through quality assurance and quality improvement visits or during parent council meetings or it may be a formal complaint. So, there's lots of different ways that we find things out. Taking a child out of a school is a parental choice.

Maxine Booth - we cannot say to a family, you must stay there.

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Attendee - but you know the numbers and you've let it get down.

Mathew Smart - we're talking about place based approaches. In my discussions, other issues within the community may become apparent that indirectly affect the school.

Maxine Booth - we need to close this meeting, but it doesn't mean that this conversation is going to close. There's information about the engagement page and the QR code where you can find a lot of information about school forecasts, statutory consultation and where the minutes will be placed. We've got comment cards here, but you can also email us. I hope you find tonight useful. Thank you for your participation tonight. Please share with others and remember to submit any additional suggestions by the stated deadline.

Meeting has concluded.