HMIE | His Majesty's Inspectorate of Education in Scotland
Luchd-sgrùdaidh an Rìgh airson Foghlam ann an Alba

Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010

Report by HMIE addressing educational aspects of the proposal by Aberdeenshire Council to close Tullynessle School.

November 2025

1. Introduction

1.1 This report from HMIE has been prepared by His Majesty's Inspectors of Education (HM Inspectors) in accordance with the terms of the Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010 ("the 2010 Act"). The purpose of the report is to provide an independent and impartial consideration of a proposal by Aberdeenshire Council to close Tullynessle School. Section 2 of the report sets out brief details of the consultation process. Section 3 of the report sets out HM Inspectors' consideration of the educational aspects of the proposal, including significant views expressed by consultees. Section 4 summarises HM Inspectors' view. Upon receipt of this report, the Act requires the council to consider it alongside any relevant considerations the council received and then prepare its consultation report. The council's consultation report should include this report and must contain an explanation of how, in finalising the proposal, it has reviewed the initial proposal, including a summary of points raised during the consultation process and the council's response to them. The council has to publish its consultation report at least three weeks before it takes its final decision. With all proposals the council needs to follow all statutory obligations set out in the 2010 Act. Where a council is proposing to close a school, there are specific additional obligations. These include notifying Ministers within six working days of making its final decision and explaining to consultees the opportunity they have to make representations to Ministers. There are special provisions that apply to close a rural school.

1.2 HM Inspectors considered:

- the likely effects of the proposal for children of the school; any other users; children likely to become pupils within two years of the date of publication of the proposal paper; and other children and young people in the council area;
- any other likely effects of the proposal;
- how the council intends to minimise or avoid any adverse effects that may arise from the proposal; and
- the educational benefits the council believes will result from implementation of the proposal, and the council's reasons for coming to these beliefs.

1.3 In preparing this report, HM Inspectors undertook the following activities:

- attendance at the public meeting held on 29 September 2025 in connection with the council's proposals;
- consideration of all relevant documentation provided by the council in relation to the proposal, specifically the educational benefits statement and related consultation documents, written and oral submissions from parents and others; and
- visits to the sites of Alford Primary School, Keig Primary School and Alford Academy, including discussion with relevant consultees and meeting with partner and community organisations.

1.4 As the proposal, if implemented, will lead to the closure of a rural school, HM Inspectors also took account of the council's consideration of any reasonable alternatives to closure of Tullynessle School, the likely effect on the local community and the likely effect of any different travelling arrangements of the proposed closure.

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2. Consultation process

2.1 Aberdeenshire Council undertook the consultation on its proposal(s) with reference to the Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010.

2.2 Tullynessle School was mothballed from August 2024 after it became clear the school roll would reduce to eight for the 2024/25 academic year. It has remained mothballed since that time. Families elected to send their children to Keig Primary School when Tullynessle School was mothballed. A small number of families had already chosen to move their children to Craigievar Primary School. The council ran a public consultation from 1 September until 31 October 2025. The proposal paper was made available to stakeholders. This included a letter with a link to the proposal posted to all residents in the Tullynessle School catchment area. A public meeting was held on 29 September 2025 at Tullynessle and Forbes Hall. This was attended by 17 people. Stakeholders were invited to respond to the consultation, including through an online survey. Seventy-five stakeholders completed the council's online survey and a further nine sent in written responses. Of those completing the survey, a majority, 48, disagree with closing the school and a minority, 21, agree with closing the school. Stakeholders raised concerns about the negative impact on early learning and childcare provision from the temporary closure of the nursery as part of the mothballing. Several suggested an alternative of merging Tullynessle and Keig Primary Schools. Stakeholders are concerned about the potentially negative impact on the local community. However, several stakeholders expressed the view that the council does have to make best use of resources.

2.3 The council provided options on catchment areas should the proposal to close Tullynessle School be agreed. In the survey returns, eight preferred option 1 to merge with Alford Primary School, 37 prefer option 2 to merge with Keig Primary School. In considering these options, stakeholders have questioned the capacity at both Alford and Keig Schools. Several parents expressed concern about the size of Alford Primary School, stating that a smaller school suits their children's need better. Children were consulted at Alford Primary and Keig Schools. At both schools children were enthusiastic how the catchment moving to their school would enable them to make friends with children from Tullynessle. All those that expressed an opinion at Keig Primary School thought that is the school does permanently close, the catchment should be merged with their school. This includes a few children from the Tullynessle area who now attend Keig Primary School.

3. Educational aspects of proposal

3.1 HM Inspectors agree there are educational benefits to this proposal. Those who used to attend Tullynessle School are settled in Keig Primary School where they have opportunities to work with and learn alongside peers that are at the same stage of learning. Keig village is close to Tullynessle and provides a similar learning context. HM Inspectors agree that Aberdeenshire Council must make best use of its resources to support the education of all children and young people. That this should be balanced with enabling children to attend schools which are well placed to deliver learning that reflects the communities in which children live.

3.2 Stakeholders including school staff, have raised concerns about school capacity. In its proposal, the council outline that school roll projections show a downward trend overall for Alford Academy, Alford Primary School and Keig Primary School over the next five years. Currently both

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Keig and Alford Primary Schools are near capacity. Alford Primary School has a capacity for 372 and its roll in June 2025 was 354. It is currently at capacity for primary three. Keig Primary School has a current capacity of 50. Whilst its roll in June 2025 was 39, this has risen and is now at 49. Should the school roll increase to above 50, a third classroom will be required, likely in what is currently a hall. Stakeholders raise concerns about any implications a small increase in roll would have for placing requests and any reduction in non-classroom space should a temporary third classroom be required. HM Inspectors consider that it will be important for the council to ensure that there is sufficient capacity at the receiving school for staff to be able to deliver all aspects of the curriculum well. HM Inspectors recommend that the council work closely with staff in the schools that children go to on any required changes such as to class structures and school accommodation. This is to ensure such changes work well for providing learning and social experiences and support to individual children.

3.3 Children and young people who met HM Inspectors at Keig and Alford Primary Schools and Alford Academy have mixed views on whether Tullynessle School should be permanently closed. They are sad that a school many older family members went to would no longer be there. However, those who moved to Keig Primary School appreciate how being in a school with a larger roll supports their team working and social skills. Though they do miss the extensive outdoor play spaces at Tullynessle site. Should the proposal be agreed, children from the area think the outdoor space should be kept for community use. They would like all the current outdoor equipment to be retained and any other equipment repurposed if the proposal is agreed.

3.4 The majority of the stakeholders that met HM Inspectors, who expressed a view, consider that, if the proposal to close is agreed, the catchment area should be allocated to Keig Primary School. They feel that Keig Primary School offers a similar educational experience for children, as it is also a rural school. A few also mentioned the need to ensure the viability of the school should school rolls reduce in line with council projections. Parents stated how important it is that families have the choice of smaller rural schools as well as larger schools in towns. HM Inspectors agree that it important that the council consider how best to maintain a range of school provision across the wider area that enable children to learn in a way that suits the context in which they live.

3.5 Tullynessle School shared its site with Tullynessle Nursery. Stakeholders who met with HM Inspectors understand that this consultation does not include consideration of the future of Tullynessle Nursery. However, they are concerned that a permanent school closure may mean that this nursery, that they highly value, is less likely to re-open. A majority of stakeholders who met with HM Inspectors, raised concerns over the loss of access to suitable early learning and childcare provision in the local area. The council has been clear that the nursery will be subject to separate consideration in regard to its future. HM Inspectors agree that the council should seek to engage as many stakeholders as possible to consider the future of the nursery.

3.6 As the proposal, if implemented, will lead to the closure of a rural school, HM Inspectors also took account of the council's consideration of the factors to which it should have special regard.

3.7 A minority of stakeholders that spoke to HM Inspectors, expressed concern how well the council promoted the option for parents to indicate a preference for the school whilst selecting where their children will go following mothballing. However, the council has stated that they wrote to all residents of the catchment, and those with children who had attended the school at the time of mothballing, to ask if anyone had interest in enrolling children at Tullynessle in March 2025. No family indicated interest. A minority of stakeholders who met HM Inspectors consider that the

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option to merge Tullynessle and Keig schools has not been given sufficient consideration. A few stakeholders, who met with HM Inspectors stated that the decision to move to mothballing had been taken too quickly, with limited time for children to adjust before moving school. Staff at Keig Primary School, where families elected to send children, provided transition support after the decision had been taken. HM Inspectors found that though there was very limited time to provide this support, it was effective and helped children to settle.

3.8 HM Inspectors agree that travel to either Keig School or Alford Primary School will not substantially increase the time children take to get to school. The council have confirmed that school transport will be provided for those travelling to their catchment school in line with current Aberdeenshire school transport policies.

3.9 A majority of stakeholders that met HM Inspectors, expressed concern about the possible negative effects that permanently closing the school could have on community cohesion and sustainability. Keig Community Hall is partly shared between Keig Primary School and the community. Keig Community Hall Users Group are worried that the unique agreements around use of the space may be breached should a third classroom be required temporarily until the roll reduces. They understand the pressure the school roll is putting on space at the shared site but are clear that changes should not come at the detriment of community activities. Should the catchment be rezoned to Keig Primary School, HM Inspectors recommend the council work with school staff and local community members to minimise any negative outcomes and changes to shared space.

3.10 In terms of any potential use of the site should the proposal to close be agreed, stakeholders suggested several options. The largest number think that the best use would be for the nursery to re-open. Several suggest that Keig and Tullynessle Schools should be merged with the Tullynessle site used for early years and Keig site being used for the later primary stages. They suggest this would address any pressure on space in Keig School over the next few years. HM Inspectors recognise that this consultation does not include consideration of the future of Tullynessle Nursery. However, they do recommend that the council communicates clearly the plans for this consultation to ensure stakeholders understand how they may influence any decision on the future of this service.

4. Summary

HM Inspectors agree that there are educational benefits to this proposal. Children from the Tullynessle School catchment are settled into their new schools and enjoy learning alongside peers of their own age. However, whilst the longer-term projections for school rolls indicate a downward trend, currently both of the potential receiving primary schools are experiencing some pressure on available spaces. HM Inspectors agree it is important that the council ensure there remains adequate space for learning at whichever school the catchment is rezoned to, should the proposal be agreed. This includes if a third classroom becomes necessary at Keig Primary School. The majority of stakeholders that met with HM Inspectors prefer that the catchment is moved to Keig Primary School should the proposal be agreed. They believe, and HM Inspectors agree, this provides children with a similar experience to that at Tullynessle Primary School, as Keig Primary School is also a rural school. Stakeholders are concerned about the potential negative impact permanent closure of the school may have on community cohesion. This is particularly the case

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should the nursery also permanently close. It will be important that the council consult all relevant stakeholders as they consider the future of the nursery.

HM Inspectors
November 2025

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