

From mountain to sea

Appendix B

Easterfield School Options Appraisal

1. Introduction

Aberdeenshire Council strives to allocate its resources in a way that ensures the quality of all its services. It attaches particular importance to providing the best possible educational experience for all pupils within its schools.

An update to the Aberdeenshire Learning Estate Strategy will be considered by Education and Children's Services Committee on [1 February 2024](#). The Council's strategy sets out the council's aspirations for our schools using a holistic place-based approach, which will ensure that services can be delivered in an optimum way, making the best use of available assets, whilst potentially identifying underperforming and surplus assets. The strategy also defines the ideal occupancy level of a school, which would be approximately 85%, with a target occupancy band between 75% and 90%. An excessively low level of occupancy is unlikely to be sustainable, affordable or leading to a best-value estate.

Government Guidelines within Scotland's Learning Estate Strategy "Connecting People, Places and Learning" Guiding Principle states that "Learning environments should support the wellbeing of all learners, meet varying needs to support inclusion and support transitions for all learners" and that "the Learning Estate should be well managed and maintained, making the best of existing resources, maximising occupancy and representing and delivering best value."

At its meeting on [7 October 2021](#), Education and Children's Services Committee agreed that when a primary school has eight or fewer pupils, then the Director of Education and Children's Services should consider mothballing, subject to an assessment of the school roll forecast that does not indicate that there will be sufficient in zone pupils to increase the roll above eight pupils in the next two years.

Mothballing is the temporary closure of a school which does not in itself lead to statutory consultation. This decision is taken in accordance with the Scottish Government's statutory guidance contained in the Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act of 2010. The Act requires that educational benefits should be at the heart of any proposal to make a significant change to schools, for current and future pupils in the area.

On [9 June 2022](#) Education and Children's Services Committee approved the preparation of an Options Appraisal on the future of Easterfield School and supported community engagement as part of the Options Appraisal process to identify alternative options to consider.

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2. Background / Discussion

Officers regularly monitor the school rolls for all schools across Aberdeenshire to track changes to pupil numbers. In May 2021 it became apparent that at the start of the session 2021, the Easterfield School roll would decrease to eight pupils. Schools with a low roll prompt an assessment around the viability of the school and the educational benefits and wellbeing for the pupils. The Council was no longer able to deliver viable education at Easterfield School.

Officers met with Ward Members to discuss the possible options for Easterfield School due to the decreasing roll.

A decision to temporarily mothball Easterfield School from the start of the new academic year, August 2021, was taken by the Director of Education & Children's Services in May 2021.

Meetings were held with the staff and the parents of Easterfield School on 27 May 2021 to inform them of the intention to mothball the school. At that point, information was shared regarding the relocation of staff and also which schools would be made available to pupils with transport provided.

Pupils from Easterfield School were offered a place at either Auchterless, Forgue, Largue or Turriff Primary Schools.

The families were assured that, should mothballing continue, younger siblings who were yet to start school, would also be guaranteed a place at the school of choice. As Forgue and Largue Schools are not within the Turriff Academy catchment area, this would not prevent them from having a place at Turriff Academy. However, their child would also be guaranteed a place at their chosen primary school's cluster Academy.

Individual meetings with parents were held on 1 June 2021 to discuss personal circumstances and to give support to each family.

Upon consultations with affected families and staff, all pupils were successfully placed at their chosen schools, namely: Auchterless and Turriff Primary, and all staff were appropriately relocated.

On [7 October 2021](#), a report was presented to Education and Children's Services Committee informing the Committee of the decision that Easterfield School would be mothballed from August 2021.

On 14 April 2022, officers wrote to the parents/carers of pupils residing within the Easterfield School catchment area giving them the opportunity to express their interest in their child(ren)

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enrolling at the school. Two families expressed an interest in their children enrolling at the school, this was fewer than five children in total.

Due to there being an insufficient number of pupils wishing to return to Easterfield School to make the educational experience viable, the school remained mothballed for the 2022/23 session.

Education and Children's Services Committee were kept informed of the situation. On [9 June 2022](#), a report was presented to the Committee informing of the decision that Easterfield School would be mothballed for a further 2022/23 academic year.

The Primary 1 admission period for all Aberdeenshire Schools takes place in January each year. Press releases were issued to inform families that applications could be made for pupils to enroll at school. No applications or out of zone requests to Easterfield School have been received since the school was mothballed.

As there continued to be no pupils expected to enroll at Easterfield School, the school remains mothballed during the 2023/24 session.

3. Community Engagement

The wider Fortrie community was kept informed and engaged to explore potential options for the future of Easterfield School.

An online survey was made available to all residents across the Fortrie area from 10 June until 14 July 2023 and was completed by six respondents. The survey questions and a summary of submitted feedback have been provided in Appendix B1.

A community engagement drop-in session at Turriff Primary School was held on 3 October 2023. All residents within Fortrie settlement, Auchterless, Inverkeithny and Fisherford Community Council and local Councillors were invited to participate in the event. Communication regarding the session was also published on the Council's website and Facebook pages. No members of the public attended the meeting.

4. Options Appraisal

An options appraisal has been undertaken to consider the future of Easterfield School to ensure the best educational and wellbeing benefits for pupils within the Easterfield catchment area.

4.1 Easterfield School

Easterfield School is non-denominational and serves the settlement of Fortrie and the surrounding rural area. Fortrie is located six miles south-west of the town of Turriff.

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The school has a capacity of 25 pupils and it comprises of two buildings, the main building and the hall.

The main school building dates from 1875 and comprises of one classroom, also used as a dining room, office and other ancillary spaces such as storage and toilet facilities, arranged over a single storey at ground floor level. The building is heated by two oil-fired boilers.

The hall was built in 1936 and comprises of a general purpose hall, staff room and store room arranged over a single storey at ground floor level.

The school has a kitchen which prepared meals for the pupils daily.

The outdoor areas are a concrete playground at the school front and a garden with a pond to the rear of the building. There are some picnic tables with benches, wooden planters and some play equipment. Pupils have access to a field, next to the school for sports and break times.

There is also an external store and plant room on the school grounds.

The school floorplan is attached as Appendix B2, and a map of the school grounds and its surrounding amenities is shown in Map 1 below.

Map 1 – Easterfield School site plan



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Easterfield School delivered primary education from P1 to P7, and pupils were taught in a multi-composite single class. There is no nursery on site and local children often attended nursery at other nearby schools.

A high-level review of the title deeds suggests no concerns regarding the ownership of the school building or land. There are no title restrictions which would prevent the Council from selling the site. There is also no record of the building, or any part of the building being listed with Historic Scotland.

4.2 Easterfield School Core Facts

Condition is an assessment of the physical condition of the school building and its grounds. Easterfield School was assessed in June 2023 and the overall condition rating for the property is 'B – Satisfactory', performing adequately but showing minor deterioration. Whilst the property is scored 'B', this is towards the lower end of the scale and on the edge of receiving an overall score of 'C – Poor', showing major problems and/or not operating optimally. This is due to the Hall condition which was graded as 'C – Poor'.

Within the condition survey the following elements received a grade 'C':

- Main building – roof coverings, floor finishes, ceilings internal doors and glazed screens, heat source and equipment (boilers), electrical power, lighting, fire precaution and external walls, fences and gates.
- Hall – roof coverings, floor finishes, ceilings, windows, fixed internal facilities, furniture and fittings.

Internal and external decoration elements of both, the main building and hall, were graded 'D – Bad', not supporting the delivery of services to children and communities.

The condition survey considered maintenance required to maintain service delivery for the next five years and the total investment required is £278,117.50 equating to £945.98/m².

Suitability is an assessment of the school as a whole, the buildings, the grounds and the impact they have on teaching and learning, leisure and social activities, as well as the health and wellbeing of users. The Suitability assessment of Easterfield School was carried out in March 2019, the school was graded as 'B – Satisfactory', performing well but with minor problems (school buildings and grounds generally support the delivery of services).

The functionality of the reception, management offices and external facilities were graded 'C – Poor', showing major problems and not operating optimally (the school buildings and grounds impede the delivery of activities that are needed for children and communities in the school).

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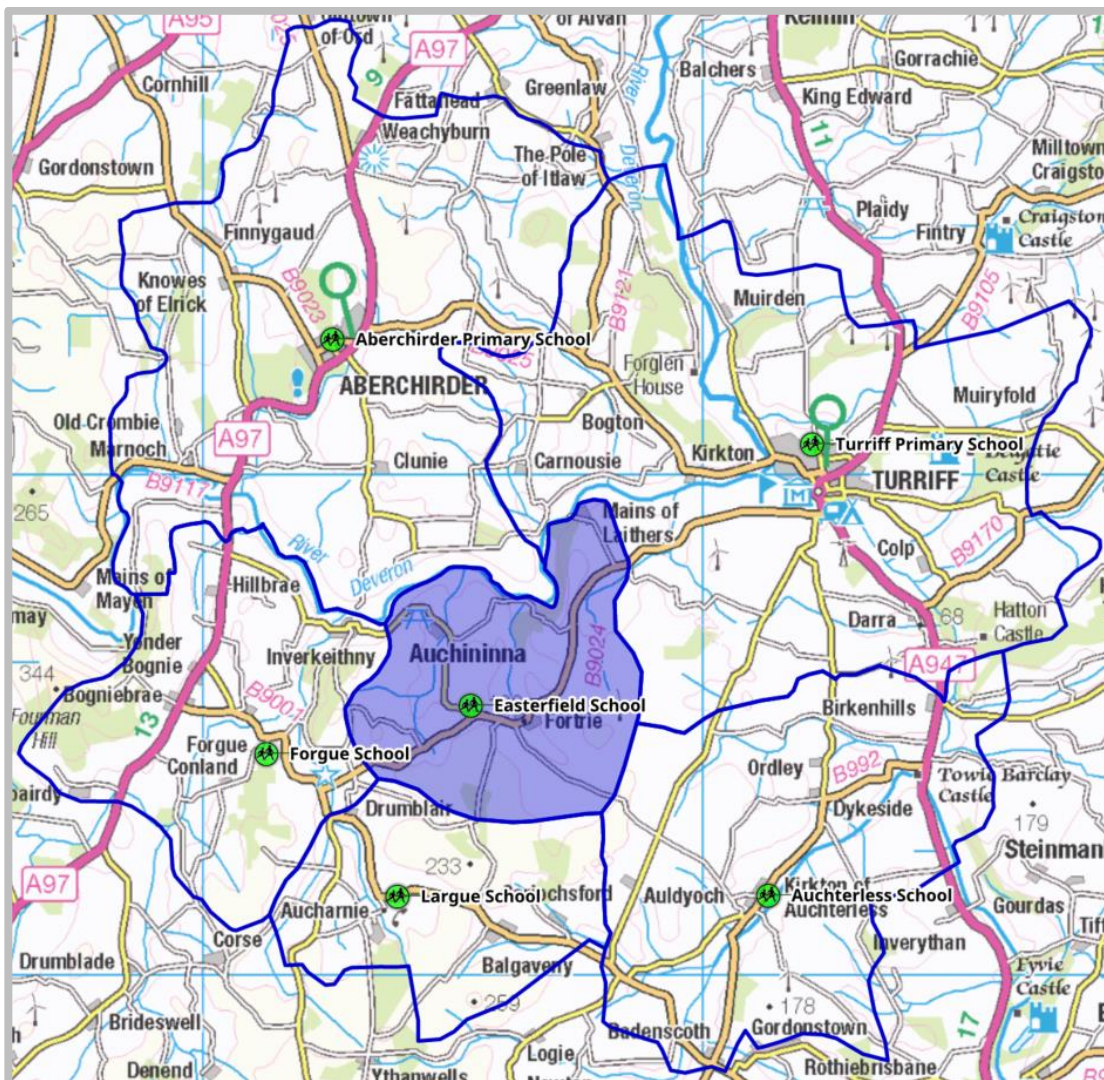
Drop-off/pick-up points, car park and bike storage do not exist. The school is located on a road class 'C' with school bus road markings and a passing place beside the school.

4.3 Easterfield and Local Area

Under the Scottish Government Urban Rural Classification Easterfield School is a 'remote rural school' (areas with a population of less than 3,000 people, and with a drive time of over 30 minutes but less than 60 minutes to a settlement of 10,000 or more).

The catchment area for the school, which stretches from Hill of Cleftbog on the east to Charterstone on the west and from south of Mid Feith Hill to north of Mains of Laithers, is shown in Map 2 below.

Map 2 – Catchment area for Easterfield School and surrounding schools



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Easterfield School borders with Turriff Primary, Auchterless, Largue, Fergie and Aberchirder Schools. Turriff Primary and Auchterless Schools are located within the Turriff Cluster, Largue and Fergie Schools sit within the Huntly Cluster and Aberchirder School within the Banff Cluster.

Distances between Easterfield School and surrounding schools sourced from Google Maps are listed below:

- Turriff Primary School – 7.1 miles
- Auchterless School – 4.8 miles
- Largue School – 4.1 miles
- Fergie School – 3.9 miles
- Aberchirder School – 9.9 miles

The Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD) is a measure of deprivation across 6,976 data zones. SIMD ranks data zones from most deprived (ranked as 1) to least deprived (ranked as 6,976) and Fortrie data zone is ranked at 4054. This indicates that pupils living within the Easterfield School catchment are not considered living in socio-economical deprived households.

4.4 Rural Sustainability and Housing Development

Fortrie is a hamlet, a smaller than a village settlement, in rural Aberdeenshire, sited amongst farms and fields. Members of the community are involved in the farming industry and the residences are scattered over a wide area.

Fortrie is a disparate settlement. Members of the community travel to Turriff or other nearby settlements to access shops, post office, health centre, library and community sports facilities.

There are no Masterplans agreed for Fortrie and any other housing developments located within the Easterfield School catchment area. Therefore, there is little prospect of generating new pupils into the area to reinstate the school.

4.5 Demographics and Pupil Numbers

Prior to the school being mothballed the roll at Easterfield School had been changing due to parents submitting placing requests both in and out of the school. The P1 intake ranged from one to four pupils.

In August 2021, when the school was mothballed, there would have been only eight pupils on the roll taught in one composite P1 to P7 class.

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There are currently 15 children of P1-P7 age residing within the catchment area of Easterfield School (SEEMIS extract 18 October 2023). These children all attend other schools in the area, some through placement when the school was mothballed and others through parental choice in previous academic sessions. The majority attend Auchterless School and Turriff Primary School.

Currently, there are no nursery aged children enrolled at any of the Council nurseries.

School roll forecasts show a very small number of families living in the catchment area with children that are under school age. According to the NHS data, five children within the catchment area could enroll for P1 between August 2024 and August 2026.

4.6 Occupancy

During 2020/21 session at its peak there were 13 pupils on the school roll. With the capacity of 25 the occupancy level was 52%. From August 2021, with a roll of only eight pupils the utilisation of the school would have reduced to 32% had the school remained operational. Such a low occupancy level does not support the wellbeing of all learners and does not meet their varying needs. In addition, low occupancy is unsustainable, unaffordable and does not offer the best value.

4.7 Pupil Enrolments

As outlined above in Section 2 of this report, Aberdeenshire Council had written to parents/carers of pupils residing within the Easterfield School catchment if they wished their children to continue their education at Easterfield School, but there was an insufficient number of pupils wanting to return for the school to become operational again and to ensure the educational experience is viable.

Each year in January press release is issued to inform families that applications can be made for pupils to enroll at the school. Since 2022/23 academic year no families have approached Aberdeenshire Council to enroll their children at Easterfield School. Similarly, each year the deadline for submitting placing requests for August start is 15 March and no applications have been received for pupils wishing to attend Easterfield School since the school was mothballed.

From the data held by the Service, all children known to be residing in the Easterfield School catchment have submitted placing requests to attend other schools.

4.8 Easterfield Community

While in operation, the school did not operate a breakfast or after school club. The building was used by Inverkeithny SWRI once a month; as a Polling Station; and Inverkeithny & Fisherford Community Association had one evening access in 2020. The school building was rarely used as a community facility during the time it was operational as a school, or during

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the periods of mothballing. This indicates that the community does not rely on the school as a public/community facility.

As discussed above in Section 4.4, residents travel to the nearby settlements to access services, such as GP, dental surgeries, shops and other community facilities.

The evidence outlined above indicates that there will be little impact on the existing arrangements of the community as well as its sustainability if the school was closed.

5. Options for Consideration

Alternative suggestions for the school building were received, some are educational/community based, whilst others would involve commitment from other agencies or private companies. These cannot be implemented or trialed without the formal closure of the school.

A summary list of suggestions and comments with an overview of the requirements for them to be implemented can be found in the below table.

Table 1

No.	Comment/Suggestion	Requirement for implementation
1	Community centre	School closure process - further engagement with other sectors within Aberdeenshire Council, community or private sector commitment
2	Community hub for kids, groups, toddlers, community events, private hire or used in emergencies e.g., during Storm Arwen	School closure process - further engagement with other sectors within Aberdeenshire Council, community or private sector commitment
3	Publicly owned building for activities such as cycle training for kids	School closure process - further engagement with other sectors within Aberdeenshire Council, community or private sector commitment
4	Health and Social Care Partnership setting to provide mental health support for farmers, young mothers etc faced with rural social isolation	School closure process - further engagement with other sectors within Aberdeenshire Council and possible NHS involvement and commitment
5	Shop or small supermarket	School closure process - private sector commitment
6	If sold, re-invest in the local area	School closure process - further engagement with other sectors within Aberdeenshire Council, community or private sector commitment
7	Sell for private dwelling	School closure process - private sector commitment

The following options were considered for the future of Easterfield School as part of the options appraisal:

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- 1 Reopen the school – Reopening of the school requires families wishing to enroll their children at the school. No pupils have enrolled at the school and no families have indicated that they would wish to attend the school. This option has been discounted.
- 2 Continue Status Quo – School remains mothballed for a further session and potentially beyond. The school has been mothballed since August 2021. The longer the school is mothballed the more uncertainty for families and the community the situation causes. There is also a greater chance of mechanical failure of the heating system while it is not operational. Unoccupied buildings deteriorate more quickly than operational premises and are more likely exposed to potential crimes and acts of vandalism. This option has been discounted.
- 3 Consider closure of Easterfield School and rezoning pupils to attend another school in the area.

6. Conclusion

One of the options identified as part of the options appraisal is to close Easterfield School. This is currently considered to be the only viable option for the school; therefore, Aberdeenshire Council must undertake a statutory consultation under the Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010. 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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Appendix B1

Online Survey Summary

On 19 June 2023, a total of 90 letters were sent to all residents living within the Easterfield School catchment area to obtain their views on the future of the school. The survey was open until 14 July 2023 and anyone in a household, including children, could have participated.

A total of six people took part in the survey. It is recognised that respondents may have more than one child, therefore more than one answer was provided for some of the questions. A few respondents left multiple comments covering more than one topic and some left no comments.

Additionally, any further suggestions could have been submitted by email to LearningEstates@aberdeenshire.gov.uk or posted to Aberdeenshire Council, Gordon House, Blackhall Road, Inverurie, AB51 3WA by Friday 14 July 2023. No submissions were received.

The survey asked questions about the future of Easterfield School as well as any alternatives and suggestions to the school closure. This report shows a summary of the results received.

Question 1 - The participants were asked what group of interest they represent.

The survey was completed by two parents/carers, three members of the community and one Elected Member.

Question 2 - The participants were asked if they live in the Easterfield School catchment area.

All participants reside in the Easterfield catchment area.

Question 3 - The participants were asked whether they have school aged children and which school or nursery they attend.

Two respondents have school aged children.

Question 4 - The participants were asked what year group their children are in.

The parents/carers responded that they have nursery and primary aged children.

Question 5 – The participants were asked if they would wish their children to attend the school if it reopens.

Neither of the parents/carers would wish their children to attend Easterfield School if it reopened.

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Question 6 – The participants were asked what in their opinion should happen with the school: reopen, continue mothballing or permanently close.

Three participants were of the opinion that the school should permanently close and the remaining three respondents didn't know.

None of the parents/carers with nursery and/or primary school aged children wanted the school to reopen.

Question 7 - The participants were asked if there is anything that they thought Aberdeenshire Council could do to encourage families to register at Easterfield School and help the school to reopen.

The respondents' comments were as follows:

- Improve overall security. The entrance gate to the school is lacking sufficient locking system. The main gate leads directly onto a public road used frequently by farm traffic. This public road is only a short distance from a busier public road used extensively by cars and heavy goods vehicles. The main wall to the front of the school is too low, meaning children could easily have climbed over the wall, gaining access to the public road.
- Improve ASL and services for children requiring additional support. School only has one classroom meaning all children, regardless of age or ability were taught in the same area.
- Improve public transport in the area.
- Provide wrap around care for working families.
- Improved Additional Support Learning.
- Create preschool classes to ensure children's retention at the primary school level.
- Streamline and improve school transport. Currently, local primary age pupils are picked up from home just after 8.00 am and dropped off again at about 3.30 pm. This is a longer day than the secondary pupils. Really should only need one method of transportation - these taxis/buses meet each other on narrow single-track roads. It's an accident waiting to happen.

Question 8 - The participants were asked which school catchment area Easterfield School should be realigned to if a decision is made in the future to close it: Auchterless School, Fergie School, Largie School or Turriff Primary School.

One respondent selected two options and as an outcome there were three votes cast for Turriff Primary School, two for Auchterless School, one for Fergie School and one respondent didn't know to which catchment area Easterfield should be realigned to.

The parents/carers who completed the survey indicated Turriff Primary School followed by Auchterless School as their preferred option.

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Question 9 - The participants were asked for suggestions on the future of Easterfield School, including alternative uses for the building.

The participants provided comments and some ideas on how the space could be used as:

- The building would greatly benefit people in the area if it was to be used as a shop or small supermarket. The area is secluded and the nearest shop is over six miles away. During the winter months when there is heavy snowfall, people in the area are unable to travel six miles to get basic necessities from the local supermarket, due to poor road conditions.
- Sell for private dwelling.
- Perhaps some kind of community centre.
- Fortrie community hub for groups, toddlers, community events, private hire and used in emergencies like when Arwen hit. This community was particularly badly affected by the storms and a generator provided by SSEN could have been out there and enabled the community to use it for toilet facilities and warmth at the very least.
- Any proceeds should be re-invested in the local area if, as suspected, the school does eventually go up for sale. The ground for the school was originally donated by a local farmer, who did so for the good of the community. So, to sell it and pocket the profit would be morally wrong.
- The school should be kept as a publicly owned building where activities such as cycle training for kids could take place instead of transporting bikes to Turriff.
- It could be attended by Health and Social Care Partnership to provide mental health support for farmers, young mothers etc faced with rural social isolation.
- It could be used as a warm spaces hub and a place of meeting for emergency use, such as the devastation caused by Storm Arwen.

Conclusions

Only two parents/carers across the Easterfield School catchment area completed the survey. Those parents/carers who could possibly attend Easterfield School did not support the school reopening. None of the participants wished to see the school reopen; however, some commented on their disappointment that the school is mothballed, and reopening would not present the best solution.

Comments were made about how education delivered at the school was of high standards but felt the lack of an early education setting in the area forced families to choose other schools for childcare reasons.

A preferred option for the Easterfield School zone would be for the catchment to be realigned to Turriff Primary School if the school was to be permanently closed.

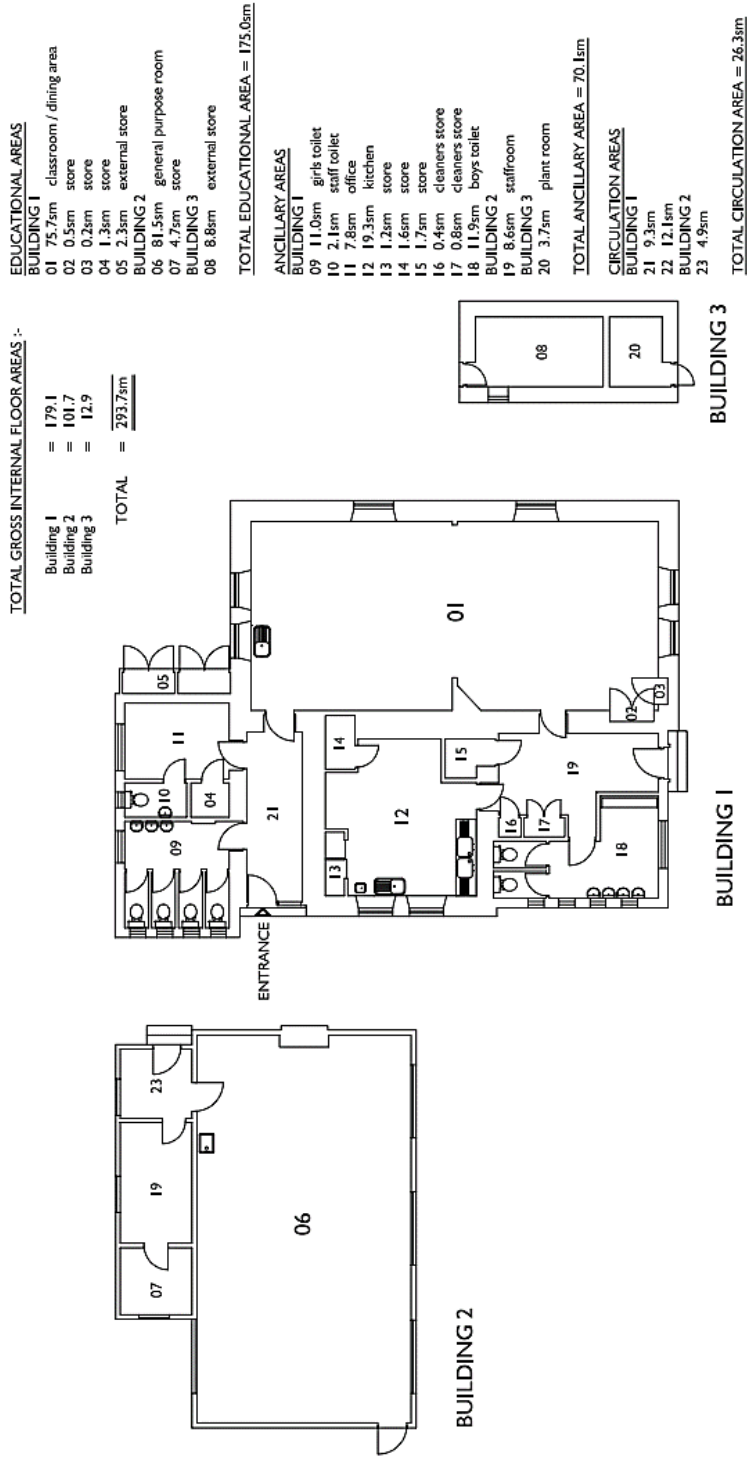


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Appendix B2

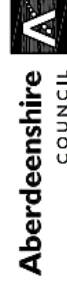
Easterfield School Floorplan

THIS DRAWING IS FOR GENERAL REFERENCE PURPOSES ONLY - ALL DIMENSIONS ARE TO BE CHECKED ON SITE.



Floor Plan - NOT TO SCALE sheet 1 of 2

REFERENCE DRAWING No. **B2906RF1** Date Surveyed **WES 16FEB00** Date Drawn **WES 17FEB00**
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Fortie Turriff



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