

**Public Consultation Meeting
Closure of Strachan School
06 February 2020
7- 9pm – Strachan Village Hall**

Aberdeenshire Council Officers/Elected Members present:
Cllr Gillian Owen (Chair), Maxine Booth (QIM, E&CS), Rachael Goldring (Learning Estates Team Leader, E&CS), Kelly Tennant (Learning Estates Officer, E&CS – Minute Taker)

1. Welcome and Introductions

Councillor Owen introduced herself and welcomed everyone to the meeting, she introduced the Aberdeenshire Council Officers and elected members present and laid out the format of the meeting.

2. Consultation Overview

Maxine Booth gave an overview of the proposal stating the consultation proposed to discontinue education at Strachan School, which is currently mothballed and re-assigning its catchment area to that of either Banchory Primary School and/or Finzean School.

Maxine explained the background of coming to this proposal and stated that at the end of the session 2016/17 Strachan School had no children attending so the school was therefore mothballed. Despite engagement with the wider community, no parents have chosen to enrol their children at Strachan School in the following years since. The council have explored alternatives in arriving to this proposal following a number of public engagement meetings where all Strachan residents were invited but due to no families choosing to enrol the suggestions to maintain Strachan as a primary school are not viable and are therefore not an alternative to closure.

Maxine explained the 3 options for rezoning the school catchment area and stated there are maps on the tables to view showing each option.

Maxine gave information on the consultation stating it is taking place under the Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010 and will run until 21st February 2020. The proposed changes, if approved will take place immediately after the consultation of the statutory process relating to school closures.

3. Questions from the floor

Councillor Owen welcomed questions from the floor.

Community Member – Could we have a fourth option of freedom of choice for pupils to attend either Finzean or Banchory. We feel like there have been mistakes by Aberdeenshire Council as the school had no support when the children had left, and if this did happen, the school could have stayed open.

Cllr Ross – Asked how it would work for academy as Finzean is Aboyne cluster and Strachan is in the Banchory cluster.

Rachael Goldring – Implied that the question was regarding a dual zone. Rachael stated that this is not an easy thing to do and this would be a different consultation.

Maxine Booth – If this was to be a dual zone then this would have to be a whole other consultation where all Banchory and Aboyne would have to be consulted. But if the children were living in the Aboyne cluster and would like Banchory Academy they would be entitled to put in a placing request.

Cllr Ross – The primary school zones would then be different to what the academy zones would be.

Community Member - People may have chosen to live in Strachan as it is zoned for Banchory Academy and that is severely important. It should be clear which academy this is for.

Community Councillor – The point is we would need to be as flexible as possible as wouldn't make sense for Auchattie to go to Aboyne academy. This should be treated as a special case.

Rachael Goldring – All parents are entitled to put in a placing request

Community Councillor – Can we suggest considering as exceptional circumstances for the anxiety this has cause in the community. Finzean school roll is dropping so people could choose either Banchory or Finzean but Banchory Academy is nearest.

Community Member - What about we make a zone 3 which is dual zone for either academy?

Cllr Ross – Stated that not all members of the community are here tonight.

Maxine Booth – Members of the community can always put comments in for consultation.

Community Member – We have concerns over choosing one primary, this risks the primary children not being at the same academy zone.

Maxine Booth – We do have dual zones in Aberdeenshire.

Cllr Ross – Need to be aware of the capacity at Banchory Academy, as pupils have been turned down for Banchory Academy in the past. They would have to allow Strachan pupils into Banchory if they go to Finzean School.

Rachael Goldring – aware of these circumstances but those would have been Finzean pupils living in Aboyne catchment

Cllr Ross – This could cause a large conundrum with Banchory/Hill of Banchory primaries, with pupils would want to go to Banchory academy

Community Councillor – Can we not have another option for the school to be mothballed for another year?

Rachael Goldring – This is an option in the proposal document but has been discounted during the options appraisal. We want to give families an end to this uncertainty, and this is Scottish Government guidance on how to go forward as mothballing is only a temporary measure.

Community Member – I thought this was a consultation process, how is it when you are taking an option out without discussion?

Rachael Goldring- In the consultation document it explains why this option was discounted. We had the informal meetings with parents and community and people did not want to send their children to Strachan School.

Community Member – There are children in this community that are 3 or 4 years old who may want to send children to Strachan. If this is mothballed for another year then it would give these families, this option.

Maxine Booth – This is not in line with Scottish Government guidance.

Community Councillor – This was in exceptional circumstances as there were only few pupils then having teachers in different days constitutes to no routine.

Maxine Booth- Taking from this point forwards, all informal meetings offered opportunities to raise concerns and alternatives, but this is about consultation for closure.

Community Councillor – There was a meeting where Councillor Ford said the community school should be where parent send their children to.

Cllr Owen – I was the chair of that meeting and it is parental choice of where the families send their children to and there is a process for this. Hill of Banchory was built so this may have been part of this.

Community Member- Hill of Banchory was already built, it was not built then. I know the history of when it was built. Aberdeenshire Council made mistakes with Strachan School which created all parents leaving but something more should have been done.

Community Councillor - Parents chose to take their children out of school, I had discussions with the council about resources prior and a councillor meeting was held. The Head Teacher said she had too much work while quality improvement officer said it was broken down. Speech and language officer and residents had said that it was appalling that not enough resources were given.

Cllr Owen – This is a consultation on the closure of Strachan school we are not discussing the history of the school. Hill of Banchory was opened with breakfast and after school clubs which made it appealing for working parents.

Community Councillor – There is a childminder who lived in the village.

Cllr Owen – Childminders are only limited with so many children.

Maxine Booth – This is your opportunity to put reasons and comments down regarding this consultation and would encourage you to do so. This is engagement for parents to be involved, we are here 3 years on and need to do something different as mothballing cannot be an ongoing process. Without primary school children enrolled it cannot be school, after the consultation this building can be used for something different.

Community Member - What would happen to the building. Will it be given to the community?

Maxine Booth – We would need to know the outcome of the consultation in order to go forward.

Community Member - Avril spoke about this being a forest school, this would be good for the community but we are frightened that they say no to this.

Community Member – We have lost trust in Aberdeenshire Council, we feel they are not listening and only ticking statutory boxes.

Hall Committee Member - Looking at options for the building, is this all depending on private sector, are there enough interest in private sector.

Community Member – This is where I was coming from when school is closed, what will happen to the building.

Maxine Booth – After the consultation an option would be a community asset transfer, but the forest school would be within Aberdeenshire Council. We cannot go too much ahead for this as this is the consultation and we have to be careful of what order this is done in.

Community Member – We fear forest school would not work and we would be left with an empty building. What happens if it can't be a forest school, is the building valued?

Cllr Owen – Community Asset Transfers are considered. A business plan would need to be put in place by the community wanting to take over the building.

Community Member - How long would the community get to form a business plan

Cllr Owen – It would depend, but it does work. In my own area a group has a Community Asset Transfer. They lease the building for around £1,000 per year. It is a 5 year agreement then year on year afterwards, Some buildings are sold on to the community. It is possible to achieve.

Community Member – We are a small community and it will take a while to sort it all out. We have a fear of selling then it is part of community gone forever. We have very little trust, we feel Aberdeenshire Council don't care for us as a community.

Hall Committee Member – Why does it have to be private sector, why not a nursery building?

Cllr Owen – Unless this is used for private nursery, Aberdeenshire Council does not need it for nursery.

Maxine Booth – Scottish Government has increased the hours to 1140 for early years provision and we have looked at this area and there is enough provision in this area therefore we do not need another nursery.

Cllr Bruce-We have got to go through process, this is something we have got to do as there are rules and this has to be done. We might want to do things after with the building, but the consultation has to run first.

Cllr Durno– There have been numerous meetings, and we are disappointed that the rest of the communities are not coming forward in this. Where are these people who want to put their children to school? This is repetitive but no parents are coming forward.

Parent – I have a 6 month old and a two year old and I went to small primary school, but I am not willing to put children to this school. The children who live in this village are in other schools and I do not know any other children in Strachan or where they attend school.

Cllr Ross – This was the opportunity for these children to come forward.

Parent - I would be interested if any other children live in Strachan as I have not met them. I would need future figures of children in order to send my children to this school.

Rachael Goldring – We have the details from NHS data with the pupils by postcode and what year they would start.

Parent - Interesting to how many children went to Strachan and compare this to Monymusk as everyone in the village went to this school.

Community Member - Children used to attend Ballogie and crossroads nursery then used to attend Strachan school.

Community Member - Parents need nurseries as they are working mums.

Rachael Goldring – There could be 5 children who could start school in 2020, 3 or 4 for next year but none have coming forward. We said at a previous meeting that we would take expressions of interests from families with younger children, but only one family came forward who might want to attend.

Cllr Ross - What has become apparent is that this is a strong community, who know the history and Banchory primary have a lot of social such as swimming galas. Aberdeenshire Council has bent over backwards with communication with Strachan in this process. There has been Meetings, community council meetings, with lots of opportunity for parents to meet regarding Strachan school of who did or didn't want to send to Strachan school. We know there is passion within the community but this the Scottish Government process. We do not want to close the school. Here this is the evening for the consultation and unfortunately people in Strachan do not want to send their children to Strachan school. About building after the consultation, this must be transparent and not vigilant.

Hall Committee Member – Why can you not telling us what building is going to be?

Maxine Booth – This is a proposal to consider the closure of Strachan school and what we do for Strachan school. Prior to now, we have engaged and try to get whole community to express views and try to promote school and seek views as part of the informal process. We are now at this situation, we have mothballed for as long as we can and this is set by Scottish Government, and this is the process. We have tried to seek comments plenty of times to gain thoughts and feelings.

Hall Committee Member – Will there be another consultation after this one on the building?

Rachael Goldring – After decision, there will be a call in period, and then we will consult with the community with what building can be, community asset transfer being an option. School cannot be closed until after call in period. The government may refer this decision to the school closure review panel which would result in an ombudsman review period.

Parent – If the school would be mothballed for another year, what would be done differently? I would love for my children to go to small rural school but don't know benefit of mothballing.

Community Member – To see if there are a group of children who would like to go to Strachan School, but it is hard as can't force parents to put them there. People who live here are centre of the community.

Parent - If we do close the school, we want this to be something else in the community. Monymusk has a thrift shop which is a big part of the community.

Community Member- Very keen on forest school and the community would keen on this, and this would be viable in school building, there is a fear of not getting anything for community. We want to get one step ahead and before this is set.

Community Member - Asked where she can get the information after the proposal.

Cllr Durno – Stated on the website.

Cllr Ross – Stated if you would like to speak at the next committee, you can make requests to speak up to 7 days before meeting, if you would like you would have to email committee officer, which you can find details on the website.

4. Next Steps

Councillor Owen highlighted that the consultation documents are available on the Aberdeenshire Council website, and that these proposals will be open for comment until 5pm on 21 February 2020. The public can comment on these proposals either in writing or by email at LearningEstates@aberdeenshire.gov.uk. The online survey remains available for parents/carers to participate in the proposal and provide their feedback. The address for the online questionnaire is displayed on posters around this room. We are also involving pupils in our discussions and each of the Head Teachers in the network have been asked to work with pupils to gain their views on the proposals. At the end of this consultation process, after 21 February 2020 all documents from the consultation will be provided to Education Scotland. A report will then be taken back to the Marr area committee shortly before Education & Children's Services Committee are asked to make a recommendation as to whether the proposed changes are implemented, then Full council to consider the report and be asked to approve the officer recommendation. The consultation report will be published on the Aberdeenshire Council website.

5. Close

Councillor Owen thanked all present for attending the meeting and suggested that officers will be here to answer any further questions and the maps would stay up for a while longer if those present would like to review these and provide their feedback.