

Closure of Gartly School Consultation Online Survey Report

Introduction

The statutory consultation period regarding the closure of Gartly School ran between 7 December 2021 and 23 March 2022.

Originally the consultation ran from 7 December 2021 until 24 February 2022. However, due to COVID-19 restrictions the face-to-face meeting schedule for 25 January 2022 was held online.

Due to requests being received to hold a face-to-face meeting. The consultation period was extended by one month to 23 March 2022.

During the consultation period parents/carers, stakeholders and community members were invited to participate in an online survey to express their opinion on the proposal.

The survey provided a summary of the proposal with associated maps and was open for all stakeholders to complete for the duration of the consultation period. The proposal is to discontinue education at Gartly School, which is currently mothballed. The options detailed within the proposal were as follows;

Option 1 – Close Gartly School and merge with Rhynie School

Option 2 – Close Gartly School and merge with Kennethmont School

Option 3 – Close Gartly School and create a dual zone between Rhynie School and Kennethmont School

Option 4 – Close Gartly School and split the catchment area between Rhynie School and Kennethmont School

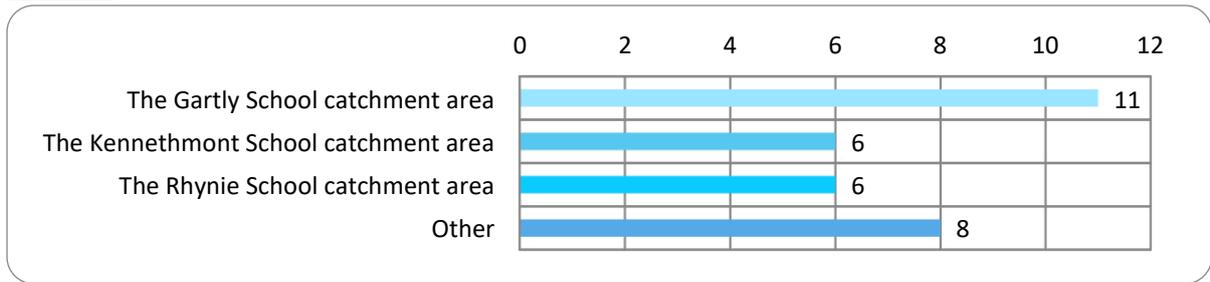
A letter containing the link and a scannable QR code to the survey was sent to all residents within the Gartly School catchment area, all parent/carers of Rhynie Nursery, Rhynie School and Kennethmont School, the proposal was also sent to all early years private providers within the Huntly Cluster. In addition, the proposal was distributed to the Huntly Community Council, Strathbogie Community Council, Tap O' Noth Community Councils, and local Councillors. The survey was also available on the Aberdeenshire Council website.

A total 31 individuals took part in the survey, the responses have been analysed and are summarised below. All comments that were received from stakeholders have been included within the report, however, some comments have been redacted to prevent the identification of individuals.

Question 1 – Do you live in the Gartly School, Kennethmont School, Rhynie School or other catchment area?

Chart 1 below shows that 11 (35%) of participants reside within the Gartly School catchment area, and 6 (19%) reside within the Kennethmont School catchment area, 6 (19%) reside within the Rhynie catchment area, and 8 (27%) reside within other school catchment areas.

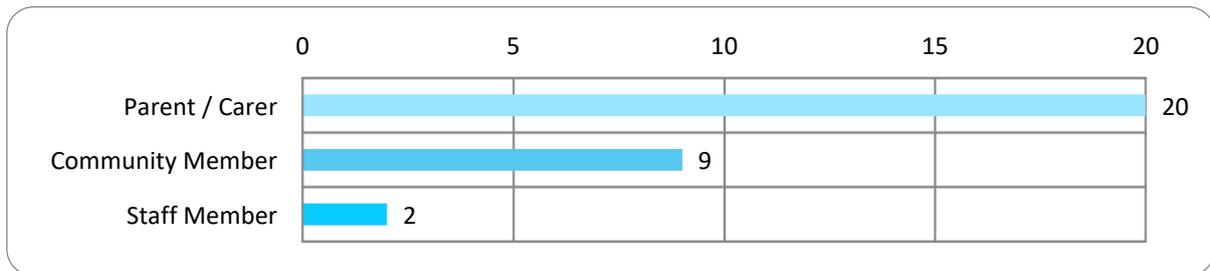
Chart 1



Question 2 – Are you a parent/carer, community member, staff member or pupil?

Chart 2 below shows that 20 (65%) participants of the survey were parent/carers, 9 (29%) were members of the community and two (6%) were staff.

Chart 2

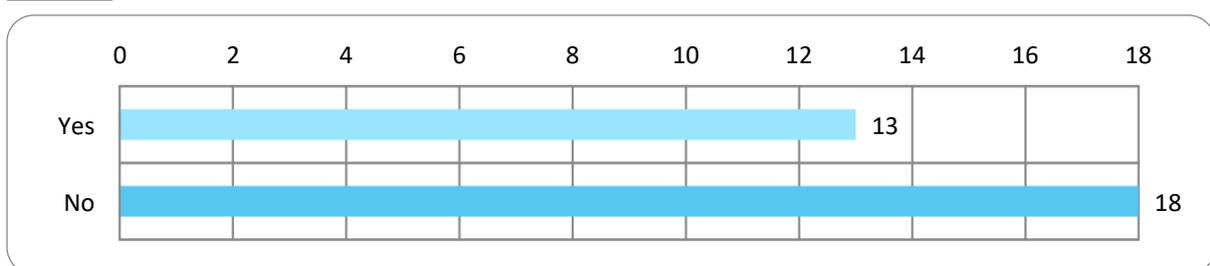


Of the parent/carers, six reside within the Gartly School catchment area, six reside within the Rhynie School catchment area, five reside within the Kennethmont School catchment area. Three reside within a school catchment area outside Rhynie or Kennethmont School

Question 3 – If you are a parent/carer, member of the community or staff member, do you have a primary aged pupil or younger child affected by the changes to Gartly School in your family?

Chart 3 below shows the majority of participants 18 (58%) do not have primary aged children or young affected by the changes to Gartly School. However, 13 (42%), do have children affected by the changes to Gartly School.

Chart 3

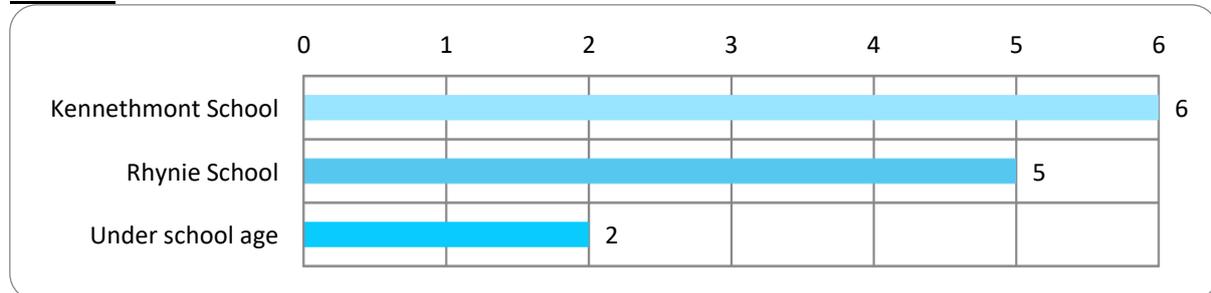


Further analysis indicates that there were six parent/carers that have primary aged children or younger within the Gartly School catchment area, two within the Kennethmont School catchment area and four within the Rhynie School catchment area.

Question 4 – If you have a primary aged pupil affected by the changes to Gartly School, which school do they attend?

As shown in Chart 4 below, of the 13 people who indicated they have a primary aged pupil or younger child affected by the changes to Gartly School, six attend Kennethmont School, five attend Rhynie School, two children are under school age.

Chart 4



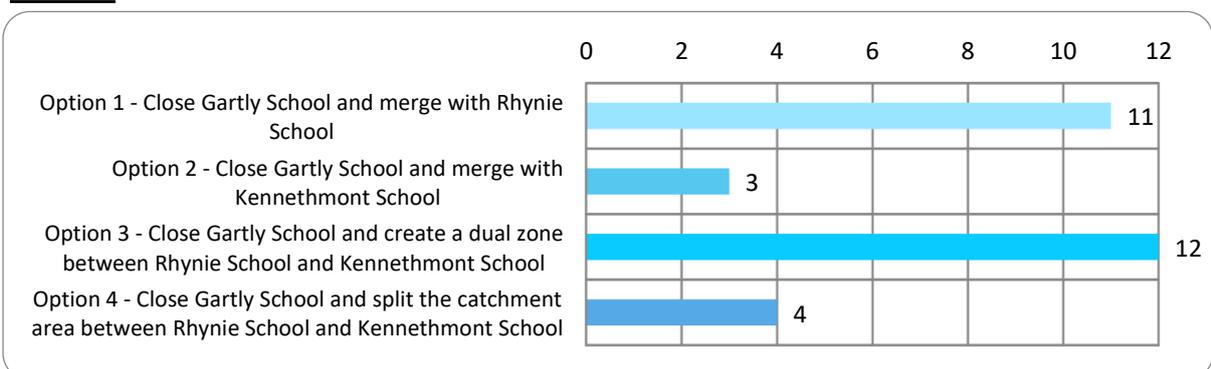
Question 5 – If you are a pupil, please select which school you attend?

No pupils participated in the online survey.

Question 6 – Which option do you prefer for the Gartly School Catchment Area?

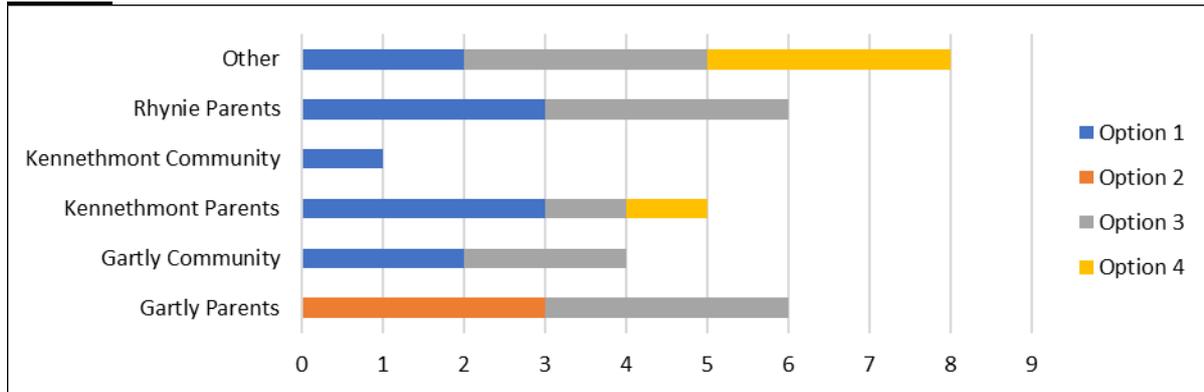
As shown in Chart 5 below 12 (39%) participants indicated Option 3 (Dual zone between Rhynie and Kennethmont Schools), 11 (35%) preferred Option 1 (Merge with Rhynie School), 4 (13%) chose Option 4 (Split the catchment between Kennethmont and Rhynie Schools), 3 (10%) preferred Option 2 (Merge with Kennethmont School). One participant did not provide an answer.

Chart 5



Further analysis indicates that parent/carers within the Gartly School catchment prefer Option 2 (merge with Kennethmont School) or Option 3 (Dual zone between Kennethmont and Rhynie Schools). Compared to the Gartly community as their preference is Option 1 (merge with Rhynie School) and Option 3 (Dual zone between Kennethmont and Rhynie Schools). The full analysis is shown in Chart 6 below.

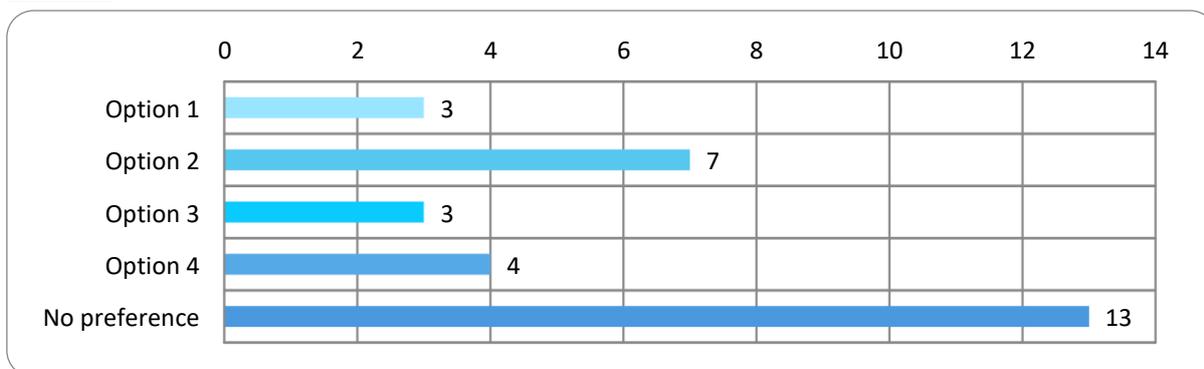
Chart 6



Question 7 – Do you think any of these options should be discounted? If so please indicate which one and give your reasons below.

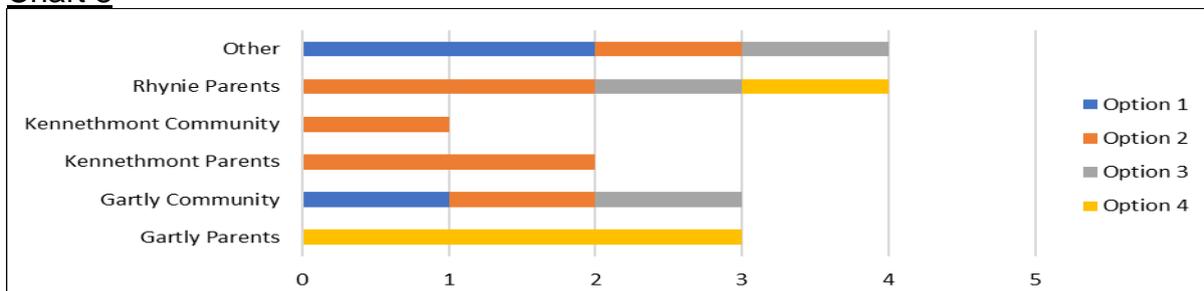
As shown in Chart 7, the majority, 13 respondents (42%) had no preference on an option being discounted. Seven (23%) thought that Option 2 (merge with Kennethmont School) should be discounted, 4 thought that Option 4 (Split the catchment area between Kennethmont and Rhynie School), 3 (10%), thought that Option 1 (Merge with Rhynie School) should be discounted, 3 (10%) thought that Option 3 (Dual zone between Rhynie and Kennethmont School) should be discounted, and one participant did not provide a response.

Chart 7



Overall, the most preferred option to discount was Option 2 (merge with Kennethmont School), however the parent/carers of Gartly School did not think that this option should be discounted. Their preferred option to discount was to create a dual zone between Kennethmont and Rhynie Schools (Option 4). The results are shown in Chart 8 below.

Chart 8



Question 8 – Please state your reasons why you think this option should be discounted

Comments from parent/carers who reside within the Gartly School catchment

- All but Option 3, can't select multiple. Without a local school or nursery in Gartly, all pupils affected by this should be allowed to decide which neighbouring school they will attend.
- I feel that parents and children of the Gartly area should be given the choice of which school they want their children to go to. At the end of the day we are losing our local school due to no fault of our own or our children and I think we should be given some choice of which school we want our children to attend.
- It would split the parish of Gartly even further if half the kids went to one school and half to another. Potentially losing the primary school has already had the effect of removing the centre of the village and parish, it would cause even greater damage and loss of Gartly's identity if it was split into two catchment areas.

Comments from members of the community who reside within the Gartly School catchment

- Kennethmont would need to be significantly extended as high number of pupils there already. Limited parking at school and the school is on the bend. Increasing the amount of pupils and vehicles increases the risk. Planning application passed for large new housing development in the village of Kennethmont. If an extension is built and if there is a dual zone or the Gartly catchment is merged to Kennethmont, you could soon find it is at full capacity in no time. In a previous newspaper article, it said Rhynie has sufficient capacity and plenty space. It has easier access and ample parking compared to Kennethmont. If it was not financially viable to open Gartly School again then the most cost effective for the Council to utilise an existing school. It does not make financial sense to spend a considerable amount extending Kennethmont school that could be oversubscribed by the time the new houses are built when there is an existing school with sufficient space. Rhynie School could accommodate the pupils much sooner than a school where a large extension has to be built. The nursery is already at Rhynie and parents from Gartly and other surrounding areas take their pre-school children to the nursery in Rhynie. Allowing a dual option could also see a school roll at maximum capacity if too many opt for the same school.
- Although on the map Rhynie looks closest to our house, in reality it is quite far away. For little ones to undertake such a long (and often dangerous) bus journey is not preferable. In real time (over the road) Kennethmont is closer by. However, it is a shame that parents don't really have a choice in schools, unless they make a specific request. In the past we have preferred a bigger primary, so that all our three children could socialise [REDACTED]. Furthermore, we were (at that time) more impressed with the learning at the Gordon Primary. We had therefore opted that all our children should go to the Gordon Primary School, and all three have successfully graduated from university, and have very successful careers. It all depends on the individual situation hence a choice would be very welcome.

Comment from a parent/carers who resides within the Kennethmont School catchment area

- This should have been done from start. There is plenty room at Rhyndale School.

Comment from a member of the community who resides within the Kennethmont School catchment area

- Kennethmont has planning approved for a lot of new houses and the current school roll is high. Pupil numbers could keep increasing and be a problem at Kennethmont. Rhyndale School has plenty space, easier access and could easily accommodate pupils from Gartly.

Comments from parent/carers that reside within the Rhyndale School catchment area

- If I am correct Kennethmont School is close to capacity with no room for growth. Rhyndale however has a spare classroom and outbuilding.
- Kennethmont is chaos at the moment.
- Should build a new school for Clatt, Kennethmont, Gartly and Rhyndale.

Comment from a member of the community who reside out with the Gartly, Rhyndale or Kennethmont School catchment areas

- Rhyndale School roll is increasing and it will be over capacity in the next few years. Better to pay to fix Gartly than to have to extend Rhyndale and possibly Kennethmont in the near future. Also transport costs for pupils to Rhyndale and/or Kennethmont would be better spent repairing Gartly.

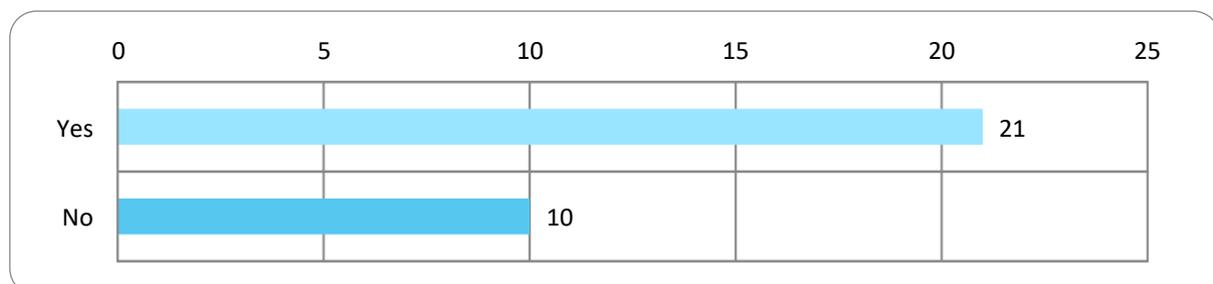
Comment from a member of staff

- The school at Kennethmont would struggle to facilitate a larger school roll. New houses being built at Kennethmont are already likely to increase pupil numbers and that is without expanding the school zone area.

Question 9 – Do you support the closure of Gartly School?

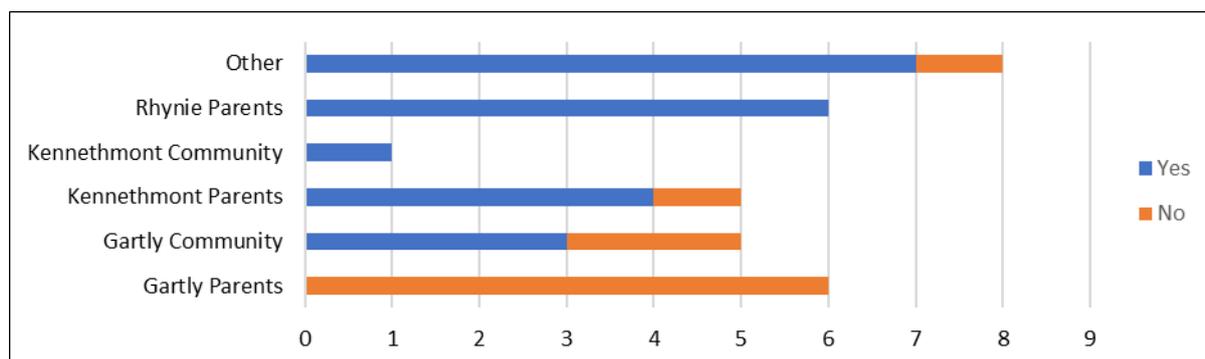
As shown in chart 9 below, the majority of participants 21 (68%) support the closure of Gartly School, 10 (32%) do not support the closure.

Chart 9



Although the majority of participants support the closure of Gartly School, as shown in the Chart 10 the parent/carers that reside within the Gartly School catchment area do not support the closure of the school.

Chart 10



Question 10 – Please give us your comments

Comments from parent/carers residing within the Gartly School catchment

- I believe it is very important to have a school for the community of Gartly. The village is, by its very nature, spread over quite a large area and the school provides a focus and a cohesion for families with younger children. Without Gartly School, a vital link for families, relatives and the community is lost.
- I do not support the closure of Gartly school, I am incredibly disappointed it has come to this and there are no options available to work towards reinstating Gartly School and Nursery, This is especially upsetting as Gartly has been my home for almost my entire life and I attended the best school and nursery settings I could of hoped for at Gartly, but I was lucky and unfortunate for my son and daughter who will not get the same opportunity I had to experience the Gartly setting, which the closure of the school should not hinder their decisions. My son was the last child to enrol within Gartly nursery for the 2019 spring start, but instead he had to attend the nursery at Rhynie, which gladly he thrived in, but now he is Primary 1 and attends Kennethmont school as we decided together this would be the best place for him to go to school without having the consideration that Gartly may reopen. Now my daughter attends nursery at Rhynie and we wish to have and give her the same option to decide if she would prefer to go to Kennethmont or stay at Rhynie for her Primary years. The other options that divide the "borders" of Gartly to either Kennethmont or Rhynie prevent us and our children from being able to choose which school they would prefer, and I would be incredibly frustrated if either of my children are forced out of their setting because Gartly catchment area would not include the appropriate school.
- I recently moved to Gartly and was looking forward to my son once he came of age to be in the local school. Now me and my partner have to decide between a few as to which to put him too.

- I strongly disagree with the decision to close Gartly School. Gartly school was a thriving primary school and due to circumstances out with our hands had to be closed leaving parents with the difficult decision of what to do for their children. I do not see how the council can justify their reason to close the school after all they have spent on the school already. The area has also lost nursery provision for children in the catchment area as only Rhynie has nursery provision now. Losing our school means losing the heart of the community which does not benefit anyone.
- The closure of Gartly school would be a huge loss to the area, educationally and for the community. Gartly Primary School was an excellent school, well respected and well attended, including by pupils from outside the catchment area. The oil leak in 2018 was an event which should never have happened and which had nothing to do with how well the school was run as an educational institution. The failure of Aberdeenshire Council to remedy the situation is the only reason that closure of the school is now an option, and it is a tragedy for the community and for the children involved that the council's mishandling of the situation might lead to the loss of an excellent rural school - with all the knock on implications for the children, families and community of Gartly.

The consultation process has been framed from the beginning in a way which encourages school closure as the favoured option. Despite the strong feelings of local parents and residents, and the doubts of elected councillors, the consultation documents written by council staff have been clearly slanted towards school closure and have made selective use of often disingenuous statistics.

The most obvious example being the figures quoted for the cost of various options compared with the reinstatement of Gartly school. These have failed to make clear that there will be costs associated with clearing up and making good the site of the oil leak, whatever the decision on closure of the school - and have wrongly implied that these costs are only applicable to the option of reopening the school.

Similarly, the figures quoted in the latest consultation document, relating to the costs of transporting Gartly children to alternative schools are also extremely disingenuous - based as they are on figures for the period when Gartly children were already being provided with transport to these schools on a temporary basis.

To state that, "12.7 The closure of Gartly School would not impact upon the journey times for pupils, as they are currently being transported to other schools." is ridiculous - the whole point is that the pupils are ALREADY experiencing this disruption, and it is being proposed to continue the disruption permanently, rather than to improve the situation by reopening Gartly school.

The Educational Benefit Statement of the consultation document reads like a treatise against small schools in general, and I would argue is counter to the Scottish Government's policies on primary school and rural education.

The most surprising statement is, "9.12 Some pupils enjoy the anonymity associated with being a member of a large class. These pupils are uncomfortable in the spotlight and prefer to blend in with the crowd as they

move through the process of learning." These are precisely the children who will benefit most from a small school and a high teacher to pupil ratio. It surely cannot be the policy of Aberdeenshire Council education department to actively encourage environments in which shy or underconfident children can slip under the radar? The very fact that "blending into the crowd" and avoiding the spotlight was an impossibility at Gartly school is one of it's great strengths - my own experience as a relatively shy child who attended Gartly is that this was hugely beneficial in building my confidence and allowing me to overcome my shyness. It would most certainly not have been to my advantage if I had attended a school where I was allowed to blend into the crowd and be unnoticed.

The statements regarding larger school classes bringing larger diversity are red-herrings in this instance. While diversity is definitely to be encouraged and celebrated, as someone who has grown up and worked in this area for most of my adult life, I can confidently say that there is no appreciable difference in social, religious or racial diversity between the parishes of Gartly and Rhynie or Kennethmont. These are small, rural communities and are of course less diverse than urban conurbations - but it is ridiculous to claim that sending children to school in any one of those three villages would result in any noticeable difference in their experience of cultural diversity.

Finally, while we are all well aware that Councils are short of funds and that financial implications must be taken into account, it is absolutely not the case that the economic bottom line is the only relevant measure. The nature of a rural area made up of small parishes and villages is that economies of scale may not always be possible. If financial efficiency were the only measure, surely all rural schools, bus services, sheltered housing, home care services etc should also be closed. We are a small rural community and should be served as such both by our elected representatives and by our council staff.

Comments from members of the community who reside within the Gartly School catchment area

- Absolute disgrace from the council from the start! If the leak has been detected earlier there wouldn't have been an issue, the school roll only dropped after the Council dragged its heels on what to do so parents had to make a decision themselves, the local community has been decimated by this closure and there were 36 children at the community association party! 36 children that now have no school due to the failings of this council! The school site is surrounded by community land so that means you MUST clear the site properly anyway! I have heard parents from both Rhynie and Kennethmont that are not happy with the possible options and no school condemns the village for anyone considering moving there due to no school, a poor bus service leaving the community association to try to hold the community together!
- For our children it had been too small, too limiting. There was less variety of children's background (one of the things we think is important). For such a small school to stay open is too expensive, money could be spend on other things. Only a few children from the village Gartly are able to walk to school.
- It means a significant lose of nursery placements across a larger area than just the Gartly catchment area. Kennethmont has no provision and Rhynie has limited space. There is also very little room for development at either of these

schools if expansion was needed. There also seems to have been a lot of time and money wasted at the beginning of the remediation works at Gartly.

- Plenty room at Rhynie School. Too much money spent already.
- The cost involved as you have spent a significant amount already. No guarantee it will be safe to open even if you carry out further remedy work. There are so many areas in Aberdeenshire with multiple schools within a few miles of each other running way under capacity. Utilise what you have.

Comments from parent/carers residing within the Kennethmont School catchment area

- I believe it's such a shame that it has come to this Gartly school was a lovely school and the only reason numbers dropped were down to an accident and not being in own building.
- This consultation will give closure and consistency for the Gartly parents, pupils and community.

Comments from member of the community residing within the Kennethmont School catchment area

- Kennethmont has planning approved for a lot of new houses and the current school roll is high. Pupil numbers could keep increasing and be a problem at Kennethmont. Rhynie School has plenty space, easier access and could easily accommodate pupils from Gartly.

Comments from parent/carers who resides within the Rhynie School catchment area

- Build a nice new community school for these buildings, that are all old damp and dated. Kids deserve the best.
- Don't need it
- I understand the financial implications to reinstate the building. However, it's a devastating blow to the community and they have not been supported. The early years facilities being taken away have left the Rhynie services close to if not over capacity. If this is to continue Rhynie needs additional places as it now takes children from Rhynie, Gartly, Clatt, Lumsden, and Kennethmont areas which is ridiculous in the current setting. The building behind the school, which was once the nursery, may be ideal for a larger space.

Comments from parent/carer residing out with the Kennethmont and Rhynie School catchment areas

- Ridiculous spending when schools within four or five miles are well below capacity.
- The local area has more than enough pupils to sustain keeping Gartly open. Money spent on transport to other schools would be better spent re-opening Gartly. If Gartly is not re-opened, will the building just be left empty forever? If

it's not repaired for use as a school I doubt it would be fit for anything else safety wise. Too many former Aberdeenshire schools laying empty.

- While it was a thriving school and Nursery, there has been a lot of distress and change over the years due to the oil leak. As a result, the children who attended there, have been transported to different schools and had to adapt to new changes and routines. While it would be great to see the re-opening of Gartly School, I feel this would further cause distress and upheaval to those children and would have a negative impact on their education. I am confident that the children who have experienced the changes are now settled into their learning and should be allowed to remain peacefully and settled where they are currently.

Comments from staff members

- Sadly, I support the closure as there can be no guarantee ground will ever be contamination free. The possibility of pupils having to be shifted out again as they were is simply not fair. I wouldn't wish that upon any pupils again (or staff). I miss the Gartly School I arrived at, the atmosphere and cheerfulness of pupils and staff was contagious it was a fantastic place for children to learn and joy to work there. The money spent at Gartly school to right this issue has grown exponentially and unfortunately there must be a limit.
- Health and Safety

Conclusion

During the consultation period, six parent/carers who reside within the Gartly School catchment area, who have primary aged children or younger that will be affected by the proposal took part in the survey. Their children currently attend Kennethmont School and the outcome of the proposal will not require any pupils to change school and they may remain within their current setting.

They intimated that their preferred outcome for the proposal would be either Option 2 (Merge with Kennethmont School) or Option 3 (Dual zone between Kennethmont and Rhynie School).

They thought Option 4 (Split the Gartly School catchment area between Rhynie and Kennethmont School) should be discounted as this would split the parish of Gartly even further having children within the same area attend different schools.

Some participants expressed concern that if Gartly School was merged with Kennethmont School it would go over capacity, as approval has been given for housing development within the Kennethmont School catchment.

It should be noted that the parent/carers that reside within the Gartly School catchment area are strongly against the closure of Gartly School, preferring that the school was re-instated. However, the wider Huntly community is in support of the closure of Gartly School.