

REPORT TO EDUCATION AND CHILDREN'S SERVICES COMMITTEE – 7 OCTOBER 2021

CRITERIA AND PARAMETERS FOR MOTHBALLING A SCHOOL

1 Reason for Report / Summary

- 1.1 This report seeks to propose set criteria for the mothballing of a school and sets out the parameters to be considered if a school is mothballed.

2 Recommendations

The Committee is recommended to:

- 2.1 Agree with the proposal in paragraph 3.4 that when a primary school has eight or fewer pupils, then the Director of Education and Children's Services should consider mothballing; and**
- 2.2 Agree the criteria involved in the process of mothballing a school as detailed in paragraphs 4.2 – 4.7**

3 Purpose and Decision Making Route

- 3.1 The term mothballing is used, according to the Scottish Government guidance, to refer to a temporary decision to close a school where the roll has fallen to zero. Mothballing, rather than closing a school gives the opportunity for it to re-open should circumstances change. There is no legal process for mothballing.
- 3.2 Since 2017, there have been 16 schools mothballed across Scotland. When changing the status of a school to mothballed, the process involves taking into account the current roll and the forecasted roll for future years.
- 3.3 For the session 2021-22, there are four primary schools which have the status of mothballed. These schools are Longhaven, Gartly, Easterfield and Fisherford.
- 3.4 It is proposed that where a primary school roll has eight or fewer pupils then the Director of Education and Children's Services should consider this for 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.

4 Discussion

- 4.1 The Scottish Government has issued statutory Guidance under the Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010, which deals with the issue of mothballing:

- i. Paragraph 63 - In considering alternatives to closure, authorities may choose to consider mothballing a school (or a stage of education or a nursery class at a school). This is a temporary closure which does not lead to a consultation under the 2010 Act. It is only appropriate in very restricted circumstances. When a school roll falls very low, the authority and/or community may consider that the school is not presently viable but do not wish to close it immediately because there is a reasonable prospect that the number of pupils in the area will increase such that it should be re-opened in the future.
- ii. Paragraph 64 - It is vital that this flexibility to close a school for a temporary period is not used to undermine the requirements under the 2010 Act to consult on all school closure proposals. Mothballing is only appropriate for a temporary period and should be subject to regular review, at least annually, against the same requirements which led to the original decision to mothball the school (or stage of education). The maximum length of its duration is likely to depend on the location of the school and the desirability of maintaining capacity to re-open a school there, but it is unlikely that it should exceed 3 years in areas that are not very remote. The condition of the school building and cost of maintaining the mothballed provision will also be relevant.
- iii. Paragraph 65 - A school can be mothballed where the school roll has fallen to zero and continues to be zero. It may also be appropriate where the roll or potential roll is very low and the authority considers the only other option to be closure. However, in circumstances where a school is mothballed rather than closed and some children and young people remain in the catchment area, this decision should be taken in consultation with the parents involved, and the possibility should be raised as early as possible, in order to ensure that families can understand the options open to them. Mothballing should not be a way of denying parents' access to the statutory consultation process required under the 2010 Act and if the majority of parents oppose mothballing, it would be appropriate to move to statutory consultation on closure as soon as possible.

Proposed Criteria and Parameters for Considering Mothballing of Primary Schools

- 4.2 When a primary school roll falls to eight or fewer pupils and an analysis of the school roll forecast does not indicate that there will be sufficient in zone pupils to increase the roll above eight pupils in future years, the Director of Education and Children's Services will arrange to:
 - i. Inform the chair of Education & Children's Services, ward members, Area Manager;

- ii. Discuss the position with those staff who work in the primary school;
- iii. Consult with affected parents, parent councils (if established) and other families who reside within the defined primary school catchment area, to discuss the position with them; Note: That a statutory consultation is not required as “mothballing” is deemed to be a temporary closure of a school;
- iv. Identify an alternative schools which will subsume the mothballed school’s catchment area on a temporary basis;
- v. Support those parents who may wish to move their children to the alternative catchment school earlier than the start of the mothballing period giving regard to transport entitlement;
- vi. Prepare a report for the Leadership Team on the outcome of the consultation exercise and make recommendations to the Leadership Team and then prepare a briefing to the Education and Children’s Services Committee.

4.3 Mothballed schools will then become part of an option appraisal for the future of the school, which will be concluded within a two-year mothballed period.

4.4 Mothballed schools will be maintained on a “wind and watertight” basis pending their future outcome.

4.5 Additional resources will be given to the alternative schools in line with the schools’ per-capita formula and normal class configuration assessments.

4.6 Any staff deemed to be surplus, following any school being mothballed, will be offered re-deployment elsewhere within the Service. No job losses would arise from this proposal.

Ensuring Educational Benefits

4.7 While it may seem that having fewer pupils in a class would allow a teacher to provide more one-on-one attention, fewer is not always better, when it comes to our pupils’ learning experiences. Classes low in pupil numbers, have disadvantages. These disadvantages are further compounded when we have a single class school, potentially with only one or two children at each year stage. Some of the problems commonly associated with teaching a small group of pupils are:

- i. Attendance Issues - while one or two pupils missing in a large class isn't a major issue, a small number of absent pupils can make a big difference in a small class. If there are only five or eight pupils in a class, two missing

pupils represent a much larger percentage of the class population, making it more difficult for the teacher to continue with planned lessons.

- ii. This will also significantly impact on the class dynamics and learning experiences of children in the single class setting, with the likely consequence that a child may be the only pupil at a particular stage. Thereby having no other pupil to share their learning experience with and benefit from those interactions.
- iii. Lack of Diversity - A smaller class is less likely to represent a diverse cross section of society. Pupils benefit from being members of diverse classes because they have the opportunity to hear viewpoints that differ greatly from their own. While some small classes do have a diverse array of members, many are relatively homogeneous in nature and, as such, do not offer pupils the opportunity to learn in a diverse setting.
- iv. Fewer Activity Options - Some academic activities require a minimum number of participants. Activities such as small group projects, group discussions or peer to peer learning activities are much harder to implement in a small class because there are fewer pupils to divide into groups, limiting pupils' options. Other options, such as large-scale games, may be impossible in single small settings because there are not enough pupils to allow for game play, or due to the wide variation in the age and physical development of the pupils, potentially making an activity unsafe.
- v. Increased Pupil Anxiety - 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. For pupils of this nature, small classes are far from desirable because in educational settings with reduced pupil numbers they do not have the same opportunity to mix in with their peer group.

4.8 It is important that Education and Children's Services adopt a best value rationale that considers the efficiency and effectiveness of schools which have low rolls and small numbers of catchment area pupils.

5 Council Priorities, Implications and Risk

5.1

Pillar	Priority
Our People	Education Health & Wellbeing
Our Environment	Infrastructure Resilient Communities
Our Economy	Economy & Enterprise Estate Modernisation

This report helps deliver the Strategic Priority “Education” and “Health and Wellbeing” within the pillar “Our People”, and the “Economy and Enterprise” within the “Our Economy” pillar, securing continuous improvement in outcomes for all children and young people and ensuring better, integrated working arrangements in pursuit of improved outcomes for children and young people.

This report helps deliver the Strategic Priority “Estate Modernisation” within the Pillar “Our Economy”, having responsible finances and having an estate that is sustainable, efficient and fit for purpose.

5.2 This report helps deliver against: Scotland’s Learning Estate Strategy Connecting People, Places and Learning and Aberdeenshire Council’s Learning Estates and Accessibility Strategies.

5.3 The table below shows whether risks and implications apply if the recommendations are agreed.

Subject	Yes	No	N/A
Financial			x
Staffing			x
Equalities and Fairer Duty Scotland			x
Children and Young People’s Rights and Wellbeing			x
Health and Wellbeing			x
Town Centre First			x

5.4 There are no risks or implications at this stage as this report is a proposal document. Any risks or implications in future reports brought forward as a result of this proposal will be fully explored.

5.5 An integrated impact assessment is not required at this stage. The recommendations in this report do not have a differential impact on any of the protected characteristics.

5.6 The following Risks have been identified as relevant to this matter on a Corporate Level: ACORP007 Social risk (demographic change) [Corporate Risk Register](#).

5.7 The following Risks have been identified as relevant to this matter on a Strategic Level:

- ECSR002 To secure continuous improvement in outcomes for children and young people [Directorate Risk Register](#). The Council needs to be assured that the estate will deliver an inclusive and positive environment for learning, working and engagement.
- The strategic risk ECSR003 to have improved business support and resource management arrangements in place across ECS has also been identified. The Council needs to be assured the estate matches demand.

6 Scheme of Governance

- 6.1 The Head of Finance and Monitoring Officer within Business Services have been consulted in the preparation of this and their comments are incorporated within the report and are satisfied that the report complies with the Scheme of Governance and relevant legislation.
- 6.2 The Committee is able to consider this item in terms of Section E.1.1.b Education of the List of Committee Powers in Part 2A of the Scheme of Governance as subject to the General Provisions, the Committee shall have full powers to decide on all policy issues and resource matters (within agreed budgets) relating to these functions which have not been reserved to the Full Council or specifically delegated to any other Committee of the Council.

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