**Aberdeenshire’s children need nurseries – join us to ask Aberdeenshire Council to think again**

We live in a country where every child should be able to get the best start in life. Children and their families need access to services that will give them a foundation on which to build, thrive, and achieve. The Scottish Government has committed to giving households 1140 hours of funded early learning and childcare per year, alongside a commitment to Getting it Right for Every Child. But too many children in Aberdeenshire can’t benefit from those promises, because of decisions taken by our local council.

Aberdeenshire is already the most expensive region in Scotland for childcare[[1]](#footnote-2),[[2]](#footnote-3). The Poverty Alliance and the signatories of this letter are disappointed and concerned that four nurseries are scheduled to close across the local authority area in July 2025: Sandhaven, Glass Nursery near Huntly, Crossroads Nursery near Crathes and Ballogie Nursery near Aboyne. This is a trend we are seeing across Scotland as public budgets are cut, endangering the provision of vital services, and increasing the living costs borne by households that are already struggling.

We are asking you to support our call on councillors to:

1. **Reconsider the closure of these nurseries.**
2. **Meet with the people most affected by these proposed closures to explain how decisions to mothball these nurseries comply with the regulations in The Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010.**
3. **Commit to meaningful, wider consultation before decisions are made, especially with the people who will be most affected.**

**Signed by:**

**Unjust Cost of Living Rurally panel of people with lived experience
Aberdeenshire Local Voices Forum
Community Food Initiatives North East (Cfine)
Kincardine and Mearns Citizen’s Advice Bureau
Community Chartering Network
Deveron Projects
Face Youth
Homestart Kincardine
Homestart Garioch
Action for a Fairer World
Engender
Scottish Women’s Budget Group
Poverty Alliance**

**Briefing**

**The importance of rural services**

We understand that the council is under financial pressure due to budget cuts, but we are concerned that the people hit the hardest are those most in need of support. Essential services like childcare, healthcare, support and advice are the backbone of communities across Aberdeenshire and are particularly important to people on low incomes in rural areas. Local authorities cannot continue to erode these services and still expect the economy to grow – without them, communities will struggle to survive, let alone thrive. The Poverty Alliance has been working with a panel of people with lived experience of living on a low income in rural Aberdeenshire over the past 18 months on a project to Take Action on Rural Poverty (TARP). We have learned through this collaborative effort to address the rural poverty premium - a double whammy of additional costs faced because of living rurally and on a low income – that it is crucial for rural services to be maintained and strengthened, not removed.

**Lack of consultation**

The lack of consultation with parents and communities around the closure of these four nurseries echoes a 2024 process, when eight out-of-hours school care venues offering care to 349 children across 15 primary schools was removed. It is crucial that a thorough community-based consultation be part of a decision-making process, to allow the council to fully understand the impact of these closures, financially and otherwise, on rural communities in Aberdeenshire.

**Impact of losing free nursery spaces**

The Aberdeenshire lived experience panel came together with the Aberdeenshire Local Voices Forum to share their concerns about these closures. One parent affected by the closures shared that her young child had attended the setting to meet teachers, get to know the space and even bought the nursery uniform, only to receive a phone call on Easter Monday to say that they would no longer have a place. She described concerns for her son’s wellbeing, and her own anxiety. Living in a rural area and on a low income due to being a carer for her older child, she was aware of the challenges this closure would create not just for herself, but for other parents across Aberdeenshire. Closures of these local services will mean that parents will have to spend more to travel to nurseries further afield, or choose not to take up their free hours, with wider impacts on the ability of families, and particularly women, to work.

**Childcare as a poverty-reduction strategy**

Early learning and childcare are effective poverty reduction tools that can play an important role in local economic regeneration strategies by dealing with area-based poverty through offering employment, providing opportunities for mothers to access the wider labour market, and improving the quality of provision for children in areas of deprivation. Removing more nurseries will continue to lock parents and carers out of a labour market that many already find difficult to access due to living rurally in Aberdeenshire and experiencing higher transportation costs.

A lack of childcare has a particularly detrimental effect on women’s ability to access employment, as women account for the majority of single parents and are more likely to be primary caregivers. Women are disproportionately impacted by the cost-of-living crisis due to existing inequalities and are falling into deeper poverty as a result[[3]](#footnote-4) and childcare remains the most immediate barrier to women being able to enter employment and increase their working hours and earnings. Barriers to appropriate and affordable childcare are also more acute for other groups already more likely to be experiencing poverty: parents and carers of disabled children pay higher than average costs, and three-quarters have reduced their hours or left their job because of difficulties accessing appropriate childcare.

Increasing affordable, high-quality childcare is a key objective in Aberdeenshire’s Local Child Poverty Action Plan. In 2024, the Council contracted ekosgen[[4]](#footnote-5) to assess childcare servicesin the area. The research showed the importance of childcare services for parents to access training and education, develop skills, gain, employment, reduce stress and increase confidence and motivation.

**Council Duties**

The Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010 and its guidance sets out the duties of Local Authorities in Scotland to consult on changes to school provision, including closures. Importantly, it applies to a proposal which affects a nursery class or nursery school (under the management of the education authority). It also includes guidance around the process of ‘mothballing’ schools or nurseries, as well as specific considerations for local authorities when schools or nurseries are in rural areas:

*(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.[[5]](#footnote-6)*

When considering rural schools or nurseries there is a ‘presumption against closure’, because compliance with specific requirements is necessary before a closure decision can be made. The guidance requires an authority to carry out **very thorough consideration** of why it wishes to close a rural school **prior to consulting on a closure proposal**, to assess all reasonable alternatives to closure, and only to proceed, following consultation, if the authority is satisfied that the closure proposal is the most appropriate response to the issues identified.[[6]](#footnote-7) In our view, these requirements have not been met, and we would ask for a commitment to meaningful consultation that meets the measures set out in The Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010 when considering any future closures.

1. Mannion, L. (2023) *Penfold investigates the growing cost of childcare across the UK* <https://getpenfold.com/news/childcare-cost> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Howard, L. & Britton, R. (2023) Aberdeenshire ranked the most expensive region for nursery costs in Scotland <https://www.aberdeenlive.news/news/aberdeen-news/aberdeenshire-ranked-most-expensive-region-8200431> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. [“It’s hard work being poor” - Women’s Experiences of the Cost-of-Living Crisis in Scotland - The Poverty Alliance](https://www.povertyalliance.org/its-hard-work-being-poor-womens-experiences-of-the-cost-of-living-crisis-in-scotland/) [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. ekosgen (2024) Provision of Rural Childcare Research and Model Review for Aberdeenshire Council: <https://www.ouraberdeenshire.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/TPI-ekosgen-Provision-of-Rural-Childcare-Research-and-Model-Review-Report-30-01-2024.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. [The Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010 – Statutory Guidance](https://www.gov.scot/binaries/content/documents/govscot/publications/advice-and-guidance/2015/05/schools-consultation-scotland-act-2010-statutory-guidance/documents/00477028-pdf/00477028-pdf/govscot%3Adocument/00477028.pdf) – Page 16 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. [The Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010 – Statutory Guidance](https://www.gov.scot/binaries/content/documents/govscot/publications/advice-and-guidance/2015/05/schools-consultation-scotland-act-2010-statutory-guidance/documents/00477028-pdf/00477028-pdf/govscot%3Adocument/00477028.pdf) – Page 17 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)