

**Commission on Rural Education
(Scottish Government and CoSLA)**

**Response to the Commission's Call for Evidence
January 2012**

Section A – Respondent Information

Children in Scotland is the national, independent agency for the children's sector. Our diverse membership encompasses public agencies (including the great majority of local authorities), voluntary organisations (from large national children's charities to small community groups), as well as relevant private sector and individual members. They are located throughout both urban and rural Scotland.

We are content for this organisational response to be made public by the Rural Education Commission. It is being submitted on behalf of Children in Scotland by:

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Section B – Maximising attainment and achievement through rural education

Q1. Rural schools across Scotland (like urban ones) are not monolithic in their strengths, weaknesses, characteristics or overall performance. That is one reason why decisions about proposals for their retention, closure or improvement should be made after gathering and analysing robust and meaningful evidence on an individual, school-by-school basis.

There are no inherent reasons common to most (or all) rural schools in Scotland that make it more difficult to deliver Curriculum for Excellence in them. We are living in an age when it is increasingly easy and effective to bring learning resources and opportunities to children and young people (wherever they may be located) – rather than continuing to rely upon the historic model of regularly and physically transporting children to such resources.

If anything, the principles and ethos of Scotland's Curriculum for Excellence should be easier to implement well in those rural schools and small communities that are, in fact,

taking advantage of their potential to individualise learning, be more flexible and creative in their delivery of CfE and use the local community and natural environment as significant learning resources. Implementing Curriculum for Excellence successfully has far more to do with local understanding, commitment and competence than with size, type or location of the school.

Scotland's Curriculum for Excellence -- in line with developments in learning/education research, policy and practice in Europe and internationally -- rightly accords priority to inclusion, lifelong learning and, especially, the *social dimension* in education. CfE acknowledges the importance of learning that occurs from birth and throughout the early years, as well as learning that occurs outwith classrooms and schools.

Thus, the Rural Education Commission has a good opportunity to make apparent the value of CfE and other key Scottish Government policies in how rural education should be designed and delivered in the years ahead. One clear and crucial example can be found in the encouragement of Scottish rural education to more creatively and robustly integrate early childhood education and care -- and school age childcare -- into the usual provision of learning opportunities from pre-school through secondary school. This holistic approach to learning would be not only a practical manifestation of CfE in action, but would also increase the employment prospects and help meet the continuing education needs of parents and the wider community. By doing so, some rural communities disadvantaged in terms of services and supports that encourage and enable employment can find the help they need through a more holistic, fully integrated and locally relevant education system.

Q2. Again, rurality and school size are not the primary determinants of the quality of education received by students. Although good facilities are welcome, the notion that quality of education is a function of the well-stocked school facility is unsupported by research on learning. Woefully inadequate education can occur in beautiful, well-equipped schools, just as excellent education can take place within very modest buildings. The more important variables are the quality of the adults interacting with the children and the degree to which best use is made of whatever resources are needed and accessible (whether within or outwith) the school itself.

Too often, the 'battle' over rural schools begins and ends with the decision about closure. If a school is 'saved', then that result usually is deemed sufficient and the status quo continues. Children in Scotland believes that both the local community and the education authority should work toward, and invest in, turning the *potential* benefits of rural schools into day-to-day realities. In other words, adequate resources and robust action must back up the positive rhetoric about the value and importance of rural schools and their inherent advantages.

For instance, rural schools are well placed to:

- ✓ use the community as a 'natural laboratory' for learning science;
- ✓ serve as the community's 'hub/heart' through place-based learning;
- ✓ employ technologies to bring learning resources *to* students;
- ✓ develop a 'cluster' approach to harness and maximize resources;
- ✓ promote intergenerational programmes and mentoring;
- ✓ blend academic and practical/vocational skills in community settings;
- ✓ demonstrate the meaning and value of integrated lifelong learning;
- ✓ integrate children's services and health services; and,
- ✓ promote healthy, outdoor learning, play and leisure activities.

Unfortunately, being 'well-placed' is not enough. Not a single one of these potential comparative advantages of rural schools is guaranteed to become an actual advantage that benefits students and communities. These good outcomes do not now – and never will – happen by accident or as an inevitable consequence of avoiding school closure.

As in our cities, good outcomes for our rural students, school and communities only will follow good planning, new investment and hard work toward common goals by all the parties concerned. 'Saving' rural schools from closure could be a crucial step on the path toward rural rejuvenation and rural child well being – but it never should be mistaken for, or treated as, all that is required for rural students, schools and communities to thrive.

Q3. There are two areas of risk in relation to some rural schools. The first is that with fewer teachers and other adults involved in the education of pupils, the weaknesses or inadequacies of each staff member/adult can have a more pronounced negative impact upon the children, school and learning environment than is the case when individual impacts are more diffuse.

The second is that some rural schools perceive themselves as being 'out of sight, out of mind' in terms of local authorities and other providers of resources and support. This can result in some rural schools being seen and treated as a relatively low priority.

However, the cumulative effects of these potential disadvantages do not appear to be highly significant. There are nations in which rural schools tend to yield the least well-educated pupils. However, Scotland is not one of them. Although the evidence base nationwide is not as robust and comprehensive as might be wished, it is clear from the available data that many students emerging from Scottish rural schools are doing relatively well. See, for example, the comparative SQA results by education authority (<http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2009/09/17165819/0>). There is a question about the extent to which this reflects the attributes of the students versus those of the schools, but (at a minimum) it suggests that rural children are not being systematically held back or harmed by their rural education experiences.

Q4. For the same reasons noted in the previous responses, there is no evidence of which we are aware indicating that rural schools or rural children are inherently less able or likely to benefit from Getting it right for every child (GIRFEC). Please note our response to Q1.

In the recent past, the percentage of space utilisation within rural schools for classroom purposes has been used as a significant reason supporting their closure. However, if that argument ever made sense, it no longer seems reasonable in era in which joined up/integrated services, partnerships and the need to share existing resources have become increasingly recognised as vital ways of not only improving outcomes for children, but also using scarce public resources wisely.

The Rural Education Commission has the opportunity to make clear how and why Scotland can learn from international sources and appropriately adapt to the Scottish context such beneficial policies/practices as 'clustering', social pedagogues and integrated health and family centres. Rural education sometimes has been – and now could become – the leader within Scotland in the design and implementation of integrated services that result in better lives and better life chances for all children.

Q5. The Scottish 'new community schools' and 'learning community' initiatives and other key education, health, lifelong learning, children's services (e.g., GIRFEC) and early years

policies all support more joined-up provision and integrated services. Joined up thinking and working on behalf of children certainly could and should include sharing the school building. The 'problem' of excess classroom space can be 'solved' by other services/groups using this space for legitimate public purposes. Children in Scotland advocates the shared use of space that complements and extends the learning experiences of pupils, e.g., childcare provision, intergenerational programmes or community arts/music. Please note our response to Q1 and Q2 in this context.

During October 2011, Children in Scotland submitted to the Rural Education Commission a variety of our documents from work done in Scotland and Europe that provide detailed and relevant examples, research findings and discussions particularly related to Q5. *We hope that the Commission as a whole will review and take into account that rich body of evidence submitted earlier (and referenced at the end of this submission).*

Section C – The Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010 and its application

Q6. Children in Scotland agrees with this definition.

Q7. Children in Scotland thinks that the *well-being* of affected children and young people should be the primary consideration when significant changes (e.g. school closure) are proposed. 'Educational benefits' can be (and have often been) defined and assessed in different ways by different stakeholders – and have the potential to be too limited a criterion to be regarded as the primary consideration.

Historically, such benefits have usually been defined by education professionals and administrators in terms of better inputs. For example, the claim has often been made that a larger school will provide 'educational benefits' because it offers more advanced courses, more specialized equipment/facilities and/or a more extensive library. However, there is not a strong evidence base supporting the claim that such inputs actually result in better learning or a better school experience for the students coming from smaller schools.

Even in the relatively unusual circumstance when educational performance – e.g. as measured by exam results – improves for these children in the aftermath of a school closure, there are other social and emotional factors that could have been ignored or marginalised by a too narrow conception/measure of 'educational benefits'. If a child who used to be well-supported and well-liked in her former school is now being bullied at her new one, then the benefits of this change in her circumstances may seem hollow ones.

In most cases, there are series of 'trade-offs' for children when significant changes are made – that is, some things become better and others become worse as a result. It should be noted that these trade-offs often vary from child to child within the same school – and may be educational, social, emotional or physical. Therefore, it is rarely the case that something entirely bad is replaced by something entirely good (or vice versa). This also raises the question about whose judgment about the value/importance of the trade-offs in a specific situation will prevail.

One of the great strengths of both Scotland's Curriculum for Excellence and GIRFEC can be found in the extent to which each of them takes seriously the child as a whole person. Relying primarily upon educational benefits can have the unintended negative consequence of diminishing consideration of overall child well-being – i.e. the impact of a school closure on the lives and life chances of the children affected by it. It makes more sense to raise and broaden the standard to place the child's holistic development at the

centre of the process, rather than according primacy solely to educational benefits.

The Rural Education Commission has the opportunity to articulate and recommend this broader understanding of the purposes of education and the criteria by which children's learning and well-being will be assessed. This would be in keeping with the current international (especially European) questioning of the narrowness of the education performance indicators contained within PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment).

In part this is about better 'joining the dots' between the academic and social dimensions of education. In a rural context, however, there also is a chance for the Rural Education Commission to reflect the value and benefits of the greater importance many rural people/communities accord (in Scotland and across the OECD nations) to local culture, local history, local languages and local employment/income generation patterns.

This has become known as place-based learning and is a broader view of rural education that has considerable merit. Developed and implemented properly, such place-based education is neither isolationist or restrictive. Rather, it can provide a sense of pride and confidence for children and young people while also offering them a wealth of skills and knowledge that are both valuable locally and transferable to other communities/settings. The 'option to leave' is a highly developed one in most rural communities, while the 'option to stay and be successful' has been much less developed and encouraged.

Q8. Children in Scotland cannot respond because, to the best of our knowledge, there are no systematic, robust, nationwide data on 'how these factors have operated in practice'. In the absence of such evidence, we also cannot suggest alternatives or improvements.

It should be noted, however, that Children in Scotland supported the inclusion of these three factors in this Act whilst the Scottish Parliament was considering it.

Q9. Children in Scotland's views have already been stated here -- and backed up by the relevant evidence sent to the Rural Education Commission last October. These and other reference materials are noted at the end of this submission.

The essential point is that there are creative uses for rural school facilities that go beyond the criteria and considerations listed in this question. There is great potential for being flexible and creative in finding multiple uses of school facilities -- primarily by making any 'spare' capacity available for other educational, early years, intergenerational, health, family or community services, activities and purposes that complement and extend standard school uses. Doing so promotes not only economic efficiency, but also the kinds of integrated services promoted through several other key Scottish Government policies.

Q10. Children in Scotland cannot respond to parts (a) or (b) of this question because, to the best of our knowledge, there are no systematic, robust, nationwide data about the statutory or informal consultation processes that have been attempted to date.

At an anecdotal level, we have been *disappointed about how little attention has been paid to the statutory duty under this Act to consult with the children and young people* who would be affected by proposed rural school closures. Because we have not been directly involved, we cannot provide first-hand evidence on the way in which local authorities have handled (or failed to handle) the obligation to consult in a meaningful (i.e., independent, non-tokenistic) way with relevant children and young people. However, we have received

a variety of communications from people dissatisfied with this aspect of the consultation process under the Act.

Children in Scotland was contacted because we produced a detailed report and guidance (commissioned by Scotland's Commissioner for Children and Young People) shortly after this legislation was enacted – called *Participants, Not Pawns*” --

<http://www.childreninscotland.org.uk/docs/Participantsnotpawnsguidance20100315.pdf>

Although there is no statutory duty to act upon our advice and recommendations, it was signposted in the official Scottish Government guidance on the implementation of the Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010.

We have heard about several proposed closure processes in which our advice was not heeded -- and (according to those contacting us) ‘consultation’ with children and young people was absent, truncated or biased. We cannot prove or disprove these claims. We have not heard from a single source about a rural school closure process with which the people contacting us were satisfied as to its fairness or meaningfulness.

We note that this required aspect of the consultation process also was absent from the questions and background documents for the Commission's own Call for Evidence. Children in Scotland trusts that this omission around consulting well with children and young people will be corrected in the Commission's final report and recommendations.

Q11. Children in Scotland thinks that it can be helpful to have the involvement of HMIE (Education Scotland) in these consultation processes. However, for reasons already noted in our response to Q7, we would hope that child well-being, rather than narrower educational aspects, will be accorded primary consideration.

Q12. Children in Scotland agrees with the role of Scottish Ministers' and their call-in powers under the Schools Consultation Act. There needs to be recourse when any relevant parties/stakeholders believes that the Act's duties have not been respected and acted upon in practice. The call-in process is far less costly and far more timely than other alternatives, such as initiating court proceedings. In turn, the Scottish Parliament has the oversight responsibility for the manner in which Scottish Ministers' handle the call-in process under this Act. Transparency and accountability are valuable at all levels.

Q13. Children in Scotland believes that the initial official guidance published by the Scottish Government was satisfactory, but could and should be improved. There was process underway to clarify and refine this guidance during 2010 that was making reasonable progress. Children in Scotland was one of the organisations participating in that process. However, its work was stopped before revised guidance was completed and agreed by all parties. That is when it was decided to create the Commission on Rural Education. We hope that the Commission will complete the revisions begun earlier.

Section D – Funding Issues surrounding rural education

Q14. Please see our response to questions 5 and 9 above.

Q15. Our only additional comment is that funding of rural schools should be understood and dealt with in the larger context of Scottish public expenditures, services and amenities in different types of communities. Thus, while there are times when the per capita cost of smaller, rural schools are higher than those in larger, urban schools, this often is balanced by the lack of expenditure in other areas (e.g. libraries, public transport, fire services,

sewers, hospitals) in these same communities. Moreover, the international evidence indicates that actual cost savings from rural school closures often ends up being far less than originally imagined or claimed.

Section E – Links between rural education and the preservation, support and development of rural communities

Q16 & Q17. There is a large and long-standing international body of evidence that documents both the positive contribution of rural schools to the preservation, support and development of rural communities – and the negative impact of rural school closures upon these same communities. Back in the late 1970s, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) conducted an international project (in which Scotland was a direct and active participant) around the theme of education and local rural development. An earlier OECD international project resulted in a book -- *Rural Education in Urbanized Nations: Issues and Innovations* -- in which two chapters were devoted to Scottish examples and experiences.

Much of the thinking and action here has focused on how best to integrate rural education and development, instead of viewing or treating them as separate/unrelated areas. A simple explanation of one connection between rural education and development can be expressed, as follows:

- a) rural Scotland has a cultural, economic and educational value to the nation that greatly exceeds its percentage of the population;
- b) rural Scotland's contributions to the nation are not sustainable unless rural communities are able to retain and attract a viable population base (including young people and families with children); and,
- c) attracting and retaining young people and families with children is undermined by the absence or inadequacy of services -- such as childcare and school age childcare -- as well as a lack of good educational opportunities and employment support for these groups.

Recent evidence can be provided by a variety of sources, including:

- Carnegie UK Trust -- <http://www.carnegieuktrust.org.uk/2005---2010-programme/rural-development>
- Arkleton Centre for Rural Development -- <http://www.arkletontrust.co.uk/?q=node/10>
- Rural School and Community Trust -- <http://www.ruraledu.org/>
- International Rural Network -- <http://www.international-rural-network.org/>
- Journal of Research in Rural Education -- <http://www.jrre.psu.edu/articles.html>
- Sustainable Rural Development programme (UHI/Lews Castle) -- <http://www.lews.uhi.ac.uk/courses/sections/humanities/contents/rural>
- Lifelong Learning for Rural Europe -- http://www.ruralearn.eu/media/RuraLEARN_Book.pdf

Rural education can, of course, be delivered by Scottish schools in very traditional ways that do not take the local community, lifelong learning, integrated services or rural development into account. Many nations at various times during the 20th century chose a model of nationally standardised schooling that just happened to be delivered in a rural place. However, isolating a rural school from its own community and context did not prove to be a particularly successful strategy – and has been widely replaced by better models.

Children in Scotland believes that the Rural Education Commission has the opportunity to recommend a positive direction of travel – one that is fully in accord with Scotland's

Curriculum for Excellence, Getting it right for every child (GIRFEC), Early Years Framework and other key policies of the Scottish Government. The Commission could choose to recognise that the future of rural education across Scotland is not solely an issue for, or about, schools. It could promote creative, flexible, joined-up arrangements that make more efficient use of existing resources (within and outwith the school estate), including the human resources in the local community and workforce. And, the Commission could recommend that Scottish rural education become an even better laboratory for integration, innovation and improvement in the actual outcomes for children, communities and the economy. We have suggested a number of possibilities here, but remain willing to assist the Commission further as it continues its deliberations.

References and further reading

Bloomer, K and Cohen, B (2008) *Young children in charge - a small Italian community with big ideas for children*, Children in Scotland

Carnegie UK Trust (2007) *A Charter for Rural Communities: The final report of the Carnegie Commission for Rural Community Development*

Children in Scotland (2005) *A Sense of Time, A Sense of Place: Meeting the Needs of the Whole Child in Small Communities*

Children in Scotland (2007) *Arts for All?: Developing Cultural Entitlements for Young Children in Rural Scotland*

Children in Scotland (2008) *Access All Areas - What children and young people think about accessibility, inclusion and additional support at school*

Children in Scotland (2008) *Adventures in Nature - building better childhoods: international perspectives series*

Children in Scotland (2011) *Making Space - architecture and design for children and young people*

Cohen, B (1992) *The Structural Funds of the European Community and Childcare with special reference to rural regions*, European Commission Network for Childcare

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Cohen, B and Milne R (2007) *Northern Lights - building better childhoods in Norway*, Children in Scotland

Ribeiro, L (2010) *The Portel Vertical Cluster: establishing a framework for educational activities on an area-wide basis in Children in Europe - Issue 18 - A sense of place: environments, community and services for young children*, Children in Scotland

Scotland's Commissioner for Children and Young People, with the assistance of Children in Scotland (2010) *Participants, Not Pawns – Guidance on Consulting with Children and Young People on School Closures (and other significant changes)*

Shelton, J (2005) *Consequential Learning: A Better Approach to Public Schools*, New South Books

Sher, J, et al (1978) *Education in Rural America: A Reassessment of Conventional Wisdom*, Westview Press

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