

Commission on Rural Education Call for Evidence

Section A – Respondent Information Form

Please note that the Respondent Information Form must be completed to ensure that we handle your response appropriately. **Questions marked * must be answered by all respondents**, unless you are directed past this question.

Name of Organisation (if appropriate) **Methodist Church**
Title (e.g. Mr/Ms/Mrs/Miss/Dr) **Dr**
Forename **William** Surname **Reid**
Address **1 Kirk Street**
Dunblane
Postcode **FK15 0AJ**
Telephone **01786 620295**
Email **wbillreid@aol.com**

* I am responding as: An individual A group or organisation

Do you consider yourself or your organisation as from or representing?

a rural area an urban area an area with both urban and rural components don't know / not applicable

If you are responding as an individual:

* Do you agree to your response being made available to the public (on the Commission's web site and/or in the Scottish Government library)?

Yes No

* If you have agreed to your response being made available to the public, please tell us if we may also make your name and address available.

(Please select one option only):

Yes, make my response, name and address all available
 Yes, make my response available, but not my name and address
 Yes, make my response and name available, but not my address

Which of the following best describes your role in completing the questionnaire?

(Please select one option only):

Teacher (class, chartered, deputy, head, special) Parent/Carer
 Other educational establishment staff Pupil
 Non-teaching local authority employee Elected representative
 Other, please specify

If you are responding as a group or organisation:

* The name and address of your organisation will be made public (on the Commission's web site and/or in the Scottish Government library). Are you content for your response to also be made available?

Yes No

Which of the following best describes your organisation?

(Please select one option only)

School Government agency
 Other educational establishment Community Council
 Professional body Parent/Carers' organisation
 Local authority Pupils' group
 Other, please specify - **Church**

Section B – Maximising attainment and achievement through rural education

Q1: The Commission is examining how the delivery of rural education can maximise attainment and outcomes to give pupils the best life chances. Curriculum for Excellence is the curriculum in Scotland which applies to all children and young people aged 3-18, wherever they are learning. It aims to raise achievement and attainment for all, enabling young people to develop the skills, knowledge and understanding they need to succeed in learning, life and work.

(a) To what extent do you agree or disagree that there are particular challenges to delivering Curriculum for Excellence in rural schools?

Strongly agree Agree Neither agree nor disagree Disagree Strongly disagree Don't know / Not applicable

(b) To what extent do you agree or disagree that any challenges are particularly acute for small rural schools?

Strongly agree Agree Neither agree nor disagree Disagree Strongly disagree Don't know / Not applicable

(c) Please explain your answers to (a) and (b) and provide further detail on what you think these challenges are?

In rural settings there are particular challenges in delivering the full range of the curriculum especially where the school is small. However, there can also be opportunities to connect learning in composite classes across the stages. The nature of rural schools should not be thought of as barriers to delivery of Curriculum for Excellence in appropriate settings. The proximity of rural schools to the local community can often also facilitate the closer involvement of parents and other partners, such as Church groups, in supporting educational opportunities and experiences.

(d) Do you have any suggestions for how these challenges might be overcome or addressed?

There are opportunities within rural settings to build up partnerships with the community, other organisations (eg churches) and other schools within the area. Where numbers are very small, it is necessary to explore linkages for the provision of schools for various stages (eg nursery, early and middle Primary stages in the local community) with upper Primary & lower Secondary provision available in other locations.

Q2: Do you think rural schools provide particular educational benefits to their pupils and, if so, what do you think these are?

Rural schools are more likely to be valued by local communities where local residents appreciate their value to the thriving of the community. They offer opportunities for the education and formation of children within a familiar local setting, thus avoiding the hardship of travelling large distances to be educated 'remotely' from the community. If rural communities are to be able to attract new residents, the presence of a thriving school community is essential.

Q3: Do you think rural schools have particular disadvantages for their pupils and, if so, what do you think these are?

The staffing of rural schools can be particularly problematic and may require Councils to be imaginative and flexible in their staffing arrangements. By creating linkages between rural schools and partnerships within the community there may be the opportunity to increase the availability of a range of staffing to better serve the pupils.

Q4: Getting it right for every child (also known as GIRFEC) is the Scottish Government's policy for improving outcomes for children and making sure that all agencies respond appropriately to needs and risks. The Getting it right approach is about making sure that leaders, managers and practitioners across all services work together when they need to, ensuring children and young people reach their full potential.

(a) To what extent do you agree or disagree that there are particular challenges to applying the Getting it right approach in rural schools?

Strongly agree Agree Neither agree nor disagree Disagree Strongly disagree Don't know / Not applicable

(b) Please explain your answer to (a) and provide further detail on what you think these challenges are?

Children will respond to different teachers and staff in different ways. Some better more positively than to others. Therefore, it is important to try to ensure a variety of teachers are engaged in school settings so that all pupils are given as good an opportunity to respond positively to the stimulus from the teaching available.

Q5: Do you have any comments or suggestions on how to ensure the viability and sustainability of rural education? You may wish to comment on the following areas:

- attracting and retaining staff;
- school buildings;
- remote learning;
- use of technologies for learning.

The problems of attracting staff to rural areas can be particularly acute. Government (local and national) should consider incentive schemes to address this. In some settings the school building might also be considered as a community asset and partnerships formed to ensure it is well used and maintained. As technology continues to develop there will be increasing opportunities to explore how better to use remote learning and other technologically dependent learning tools. These area of development will require investment but when set against options such as closing remote schools and bussing more pupils this may soon be seen as relatively insignificant.

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

In Scotland, local authorities have a statutory duty to ensure the adequate and efficient provision of school education in their area. If a local authority proposes to change any part of the existing education provision then they must engage in formal consultation process. The process to be followed when a local authority is consulting on a relevant school reorganisation proposal is set out in the Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010, referred to here as the “Schools Consultation Act”. Under the Schools Consultation Act, there are specific provisions relating to rural schools – including factors that Councils must consider before proposing to close any rural school – and there are specific duties on Scottish Ministers in relation to scrutiny (call-in) and consent to Council proposals.

This section seeks your views on the Schools Consultation Act and its current application.

Q6: Under the Schools Consultation Act, a rural school is defined using statistical data under the Scottish Government’s “Urban Rural Classification”. This divides areas of Scotland into 8 types, depending on the population size of the town or settlement together with the travel time needed to get to a larger town. For the purposes of the Schools Consultation Act, schools in the three rural categories Accessible Rural, Remote Rural and Very Remote Rural are considered to be rural schools. These are all schools in settlements with less than 3,000 people living in them and with different lengths of ‘drive time’ to a bigger town or settlement of more than 10,000 people.

(a) To what extent do you agree or disagree with the definition of a rural school for the purposes of the Schools Consultation Act?

Strongly agree Agree Neither agree nor disagree Disagree Strongly disagree Don't know / Not applicable

(b) Please explain your choice or suggest any alternative?

There can be no perfect definition as sizes of community – distances – and travelling times are somewhat arbitrary and are not always as meaningful as they might be but the existing definitions seem as good as any. The challenges of the scattered nature of community in many rural settings is often under appreciated by the bulk of the population living in larger communities but for those living in remote rural settings reasonable access to education remains a vital issue if we are not to see the population profile in these communities continue towards a higher age demographic.

Q7: The Scottish Government’s view is that educational benefits should be at the heart of any proposals to make a significant change to a school. The Schools Consultation Act specifies that local authorities have to prepare an educational benefits statement for all consultations under the Act. Local authorities must consider:

- the likely effects of the proposal on current and future pupils of the school, other users of the school's facilities and the pupils of any other schools in the area;
- explain how the authority intends to minimise or avoid any adverse effects of the proposal; and
- describe the educational benefits which it believes will result from the proposal and provide reasons for this.

(a) To what extent do you agree or disagree that educational benefits should be the primary consideration in making a significant change to a school?

Strongly agree
 Agree
 Neither agree nor disagree
 Disagree
 Strongly disagree
 Don't know / Not applicable

(b) Please explain your answer, and provide any comments on how the educational benefits statement is used or how you think it could be improved?

In the past some Councils have selected smaller schools as convenient targets for cost savings, usually justifying their actions with claims that small schools can't provide an adequate curriculum . Such claims are often contradicted by HMIe evidence. There should be greater transparency in the application of the criteria used to compose such educational benefits statements. While the education of pupils should always be paramount in considering changes to a school there are other consider which must be held in mind such as the overall impact on communities and on family life in settings where families and communities are already under specific pressures arising out of remote settings and lack of resourcing in other ways.

Q8: Sometimes Councils will propose the closure of a school. The Schools Consultation Act requires Councils to have special regard to three factors before deciding to propose and consult on a rural school closure. These are:

- if there is any viable alternative to the closure proposal;
- the likely effect of the school's closure on the local community; and
- the likely consequences of the closure on travel and transport arrangements.

(a) Do you have any comments on how these factors have operated in practice?

While the Councils may take into regard these three factors understandable pressures usually of perceived financial savings may tend to tilt the balance against rural schools. If we are to continue to sustain rural communities champions within the decision making process must be found for "rural communities". In the past, when making closure proposals, some Councils have promised free pupil transport to some of the pupils affected, only to break these promises a few years later. Councils must be held accountable by the Government for honouring such agreements.

(b) Do you have any suggestions for improvements or alternatives to the existing process?

There may be a role for a specific national ombudsman for rural education/schools who has a well informed perspective of rural issues and can champion the cause of strengthening rural education provision.

Q9: Councils have to balance their duties under the Schools Consultation Act with their responsibilities for efficient management of the school estate. There is Scottish Government guidance on some aspects of this, for example, assessing and reporting Condition and Suitability ratings. Thinking about how Councils do this, do you have any comments on how they:

(a) make decisions about the school estate, including assessments of condition or suitability and how investment in school building is prioritised?

Councils should be required to undertake more meaningful discussions with local community groups prior to consulting on specific proposals.

(b) assess the capacity of primary and secondary schools?

It is desirable to see greater consistency across and within Councils in the use of criteria used to assess school capacity.

(c) manage and measure local information such as projected population numbers and pupil rolls?

This is a very imprecise science. Councils have often underestimated the impact of local housing developments on the size of schools needed in particular areas. Some of the most recently built schools in some areas are significantly over capacity, even in the first year of opening

Q10: The consultation process Councils must undertake is set out in the Schools Consultation Act.

(a) How satisfied or dissatisfied are you with the statutory consultation process currently applied by Councils under the Schools Consultation Act?

Very satisfied Satisfied Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied Dissatisfied Very dissatisfied Don't know / Not applicable

(b) How satisfied or dissatisfied are you with the informal consultation sometimes undertaken by Councils in advance of statutory consultation under the Schools Consultation Act?

Very satisfied Satisfied Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied Dissatisfied Very dissatisfied Don't know / Not applicable

(c) Do you have any comments on consultation under the Schools Consultation Act or how it could be improved?

Some Councils merely go through a process to enable them to progress with plans which they have already formed. Few Councils engage in meaningful informal consultation which leads to any sense of partnership working

Q11: The Schools Consultation Act requires Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Education (HMIE), who are now part of the Scottish Government agency Education Scotland, to be involved in the consultation process. They are required to prepare and submit to the Council a professional and independent report on the educational aspects of the proposal being consulted on.

(a) To what extent do you agree or disagree with the role of Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Education under the Schools Consultation Act?

Strongly agree Agree Neither agree nor disagree Disagree Strongly disagree Don't know / Not applicable

(b) Do you have any comments on how this requirement has operated in practice or how it could be improved?

The speed of this process can mean that insufficient attention is given to the views of various community groups. The timescale for HMIE involvement should be extended.

Q12: Under the Schools Consultation Act, Scottish Ministers have powers to decide whether to "call in" or review a Council's decision to close a school. This can be applied where it appears to Scottish Ministers that the authority may have failed in a significant regard to comply with the requirements in the Schools Consultation Act or to take proper account of a material consideration relevant to the decision. When Scottish Ministers call in a proposal, they can then decide whether or not to allow the closure to go ahead.

(a) To what extent do you agree or disagree with the role of Scottish Ministers' and their call-in powers under the Schools Consultation Act?

Strongly agree Agree Neither agree nor disagree Disagree Strongly disagree Don't know / Not applicable

(b) Do you have any comments on the call-in process or how it could be improved?

While welcoming this provision we feel it should go further. Our understanding is that Scottish Ministers can only get involved when the process is shown to be technically flawed. Yet there may be occasions when the wrong decision has been made by a Council which simply ignores the evidence and sticks to its original proposal or where broader considerations have not been taken fully into account. Scottish Ministers should be able to review any decision in principle.

Q13: There is statutory guidance issued to local authorities, by the Scottish Government, intended to assist those who are involved in overseeing the consultation and decision making processes around proposed changes to their schools, as required in the Schools Consultation Act:

(a) Are you satisfied with the guidance to local authorities under the Schools Consultation Act?

- Very satisfied Satisfied Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied Dissatisfied Very dissatisfied Don't know / Not applicable

(b) Please explain your answer, and provide any comments on how the support and implementation of the Schools Consultation Act could be improved?

While there is guidance to local authorities there is little evidence this is being applied consistently across local authorities.

Section D – Funding issues surrounding rural education

Under the Local Government in Scotland Act 2003, Councils have a statutory duty to make arrangements to secure Best Value. They must carry out their overarching duties on delivery of all council services, including responsibilities for managing the school estate in accordance with the Best Value duty. The Commission is also considering the funding issues surrounding rural education, including the relationship between the Best Value duty and the Schools Consultation Act.

Q14: Do you have any comments on how Councils deliver their Best Value requirement alongside the delivery of rural education and their responsibilities under the Schools Consultation Act?

We have considerable sympathy with Councils which are required to "square the circle" on this issue. Scottish Government must take appropriate account of the demography and geography of each Council area when allocating budgets. They should also consider other funding mechanisms to support school building / modernisation programmes.

Q15: Do you have any other comments on the funding issues around delivering rural education?

While the cost may fall principally within the education budget the provision of accessibility by rural communities to education facilities needs to be considered holistically as a major pillar of community life.

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

Part of the Commission's remit is to examine the links between rural education and the preservation, support and development of rural communities and to make recommendations on how these links might be strengthened if necessary.

Q16: Do you have any comments on the links between rural education and the preservation, support and development of rural communities?

It is self evident that rural communities are significantly impoverished when local school provision is removed. It should be accepted that rural schools cannot be - and should not be - mirror images of urban schools. There is clear pressures when schooling is not accessible the demographic of remote rural areas change forcing younger families to live nearer to where schooling is accessible.

Q17: Do you wish to highlight any sources of evidence in relation to this area of the Commission's work that you think they should consider?

A study should be carried out into the impact of children having to travel long distances (up to and in excess of an hour each way) has both on the education of the pupil but also on the demography of the remoter communities around Scotland.

Section F – Any other comments

Q18: Please tell us if you have any other comments on the delivery of rural education that you would like the Commission to consider?

In compiling this response we have benefitted from working alongside other denominations through both the Scottish Churches Education Group and the Scottish Churches Rural Group which both embrace the main denominations in Scotland working together with on one hand the interests of the education system and on the other the interests of rural communities at heart. The steady withdrawal of services from rural communities such as postal services (with knock on effects on shops), transport, healthcare and other facilities which bind together communities is of concern to us all. There is increasing isolation in some remote communities where increasing costs of fuel and other commodities hit harder than in urban settings. In many rural settings the only public gathering points are either the local school or church and we recognise the challenges in supporting both. There is already many places where close partnerships have been fostered between schools and churches and there are opportunities to build on these and develop new relationships.

Rural communities are already under extreme pressure in Scotland through lack of choice and access to the facilities (eg community services, health, shops, transport and communications) that urban communities enjoy freely and mostly more cheaply. We would contend that the closure of and reduction in quality of rural education/schools can severely affect both the education of pupils living in remote rural communities and the demography and overall health of local communities. If rural communities are to thrive in Scotland both local and national government needs to be prepared to invest in rural education and ensure that appropriate, adequate and targeted resourcing is provided and seek the partnerships which might help sustain rural life into the future.