Dumfries and Galloway COUNCIL

Dumfries and Galloway Learning Estate Strategy

2026–2031

1. Executive Summary

The school estate is one of Dumfries and Galloway Council's most valuable assets. The current school estate has a value of approximately £1.4 billion and serves a pupil roll of 18,000 children and young people across 97 primary schools, 16 secondary schools, 1 specialist school, 2 inclusion bases and 15 supported learning centres within mainstream schools. Dumfries and Galloway is also a rural region spanning 2,481 square miles and includes 40 Accessible Rural Schools and 29 Remote Rural Schools as classified by the Scottish Government Urban Rural Classification 2020 (Scottish Government, 2025).

The Learning Estate Strategy draws its aims from the Dumfries and Galloway Council Plan (DGC, 2023–2028) and establishes the estate's needs and objectives to achieve these aims. The strategy looks at the buildings and facilities available to the Council, identifying potential shortfalls, areas of surplus, and any unsuitable or underutilised spaces. It also considers opportunities for development, rationalisation or reconfigurations of the estate to ensure continual improvement in standards and outcomes for children and young people. This aligns with the Scottish Government's Learning Estate Strategy: Connecting People, Places and Learning (2019), which emphasises that "learning environments should support excellence and equity for all" (Scottish Government, 2019).

In order to achieve this, the Council will need to focus on sustainable schools that are the right size, in the right place, and serve learners, school users and local communities. This is consistent with the Place Principle (Scottish Government & COSLA, 2019), which encourages local authorities to align resources and services around place-based needs, particularly in rural areas. The Scottish Parliament's Education in Remote and Rural Communities Briefing (2020) also highlights that sustainability in rural school planning requires a balance between educational provision and community vitality.

> "Excellence and equity underpin the approach to delivering Scottish education. This means focusing all investment on improving outcomes for learners, communities and the economy by enhancing and extending joined up learning experiences."
>
> Scotland's Learning Estate Strategy, 2019

The application of this strategy will mirror the 'One-Council' approach and will be implemented by Officers from a wide range of directorates including education, communities, finance, estates, transport, and planning. This reflects the collaborative approach encouraged under the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015, which requires local authorities to plan with, not for, their communities (Scottish Government, 2015). This document outlines the benefits of an estate strategy to both school stakeholders and tax-paying citizens, describes the key processes and delivery vehicles for the successful implementation of its aims, and incorporates examples of good practice and guidance from

1. Executive Summary (cont'd)

the Scottish Government, Audit Scotland, and relevant education and infrastructure bodies.

A focus on equity, sustainability, fitness for purpose, and future proofing are at the heart of this strategy, which emphasises the need to place the child at the centre of all decision-making processes (Standards in Scotland's Schools etc. Act 2000). In addition, the long lead time for capital projects, a stretched revenue budget that must maintain large numbers of underutilised schools, the interdependencies between projects, and the large sums of investment required, means that developments and upgrades to new and existing schools have to be planned years in advance. This need for long-term estate planning has also been reinforced in the National Planning Framework 4 (NPF4), which calls for a strategic, future-proofed approach to public infrastructure investment (Scottish Government, 2023).

It is therefore essential to have an updated Learning Estate Strategy that promotes a modern school model which can both effectively and efficiently plan for the estate for many years into the future and make the best use of physical resources for the benefit of children, young people and the surrounding community (OECD, 2015; Scottish Government, 2024).

EXECTUIVE SUMMARY KEY POINTS

Modern, Sustainable Schools: The strategy focuses on creating inclusive, energy-efficient, and future-ready learning environments across Dumfries and Galloway.

Right Size, Right Place: Schools will be planned and maintained to match local needs, especially in rural areas, ensuring accessibility and efficient use of resources.

Learner-Centred Approach: All decisions prioritise the wellbeing, attainment, and equity of children and young people.

Community Involvement: Local voices will shape school planning through meaningful engagement and transparent decision-making.

Long-Term Planning: The strategy responds to demographic change, climate goals, and financial pressures with a clear, data-driven roadmap for investment.

2. Introduction

Dumfries and Galloway Council is committed to giving all local children and young people an equal chance to fulfil their potential. Raising attainment in schools is central to this ambition, shaping who our young people become, how they contribute to society, and the sustainability of our communities. This requires a school estate that works for everyone–one that supports inclusive, high-quality learning environments across all communities, in line with the ambitions of the National Improvement Framework and Improvement Plan (Scottish Government, 2023) and the Council's own Children and Young People's Services Plan (Dumfries and Galloway Council, 2023–26).

Over the last ten years, Dumfries and Galloway Council has invested significantly in its school estate, delivering a number of new assets including Dalbeattie High School, North West Community Campus, The Bridge, St Joseph's College and Dumfries High School. The planning and implementation of these learning campuses have shared a common focus: to ensure that learners at all stages have the best possible experience. Where appropriate, the Council continues to model the Scottish Government's ambition to build "2–18" campuses, reflecting the principles outlined in Building Better Schools: Investing in Scotland's Future (Scottish Government & COSLA, 2009), and shares its priorities around energy efficiency and the aspiration to achieve near-zero carbon buildings in line with the Learning Estate Investment Programme (LEIP) criteria (Scottish Government, 2019).

The 2009 joint Scottish Government and COSLA publication School Estate Strategy: Building Better Schools set out ten guiding principles to drive investment in both existing and new school infrastructure. Dumfries and Galloway Council's Learning Estate Strategy–and the School Estate Management Plan-reflect these principles. Future investment proposals will be shaped by this national framework, as well as by earlier programmes such as the Scotland's Schools for the Future: Interim Findings Report (Scottish Futures Trust, 2018). Our vision for well-designed, maintained, and managed schools requires a holistic, long-term approach that is shared by all stakeholders and decision-makers.

> "Schools are at the heart of their communities, delivering high-quality learning while also acting as a community resource and hub for wider community activity."
>
> Scotland's Learning Estate Strategy, 2019

Dumfries and Galloway's unique geography presents significant challenges in delivering a consistent and sustainable Learning Estate Strategy. As the third-largest region in Scotland, covering 2,481 square miles, and with nearly 20% of the population living in remote areas, the Council must balance accessibility, equity, and efficiency. Of the region's 114 schools, 69 are classed as 'remote rural' or 'accessible rural', as defined in the Scottish Government

2. Introduction (cont'd)

Urban Rural Classification (2020). This classification has a direct impact on the manageability and cost-effectiveness of the estate and is considered in regional strategic planning processes including the Regional Spatial Strategy and National Planning Framework 4 (NPF4) (Scottish Government, 2023).

Demographic trends further reinforce the need for strategic planning. The region's population is projected to decline by 6.1% by 2037, with the number of children aged 0–15 expected to fall by 23.1% by 2043 (National Records of Scotland, 2023-based population projections). These figures highlight the importance of future-proofing our schools to ensure that investment is sustainable, evidence-based, and responsive to long-term needs–an approach aligned with the Action Plan to Address Depopulation (Scottish Government, 2024).

Only through close partnership with schools, communities, and stakeholders can we deliver a strategy that benefits both current and future learners. Our vision for well-designed, maintained, and managed schools reflects the high value we place on education and its role in shaping the future of Dumfries and Galloway. Investment in the learning estate must support local priorities, including locality planning, public service reform, strategic asset management, and inclusive economic growth–principles embedded in the Place Principle (Scottish Government & COSLA, 2019) and Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015.

INTRODUCTION KEY POINTS

Commitment to Equity: The Council aims to give every child and young person an equal chance to succeed through high-quality, inclusive education.

Strategic Investment: Major investments in new schools and campuses reflect a long-term vision for modern, flexible learning environments.

Rural Challenges: Dumfries and Galloway's large, rural geography requires careful planning to balance accessibility, quality, and cost.

Demographic Pressures: Falling school-age populations highlight the need for future-proofed, sustainable school planning.

Community-Centred Vision: The strategy supports local priorities and places schools at the heart of community wellbeing and development.

3. Strategy Hierarchy

The Dumfries and Galloway Learning Estate Strategy is a comprehensive framework that aligns local educational planning with national priorities to ensure high-quality, inclusive, and future-ready learning environments across the region (Scottish Government, 2023; OECD, 2015). At its foundation are three strategic layers: the Council Plan, which sets the overarching vision for community wellbeing and education (Dumfries and Galloway Council, 2023); the Service Plan, which translates this vision into actionable goals for educational services (Dumfries and Galloway Council, 2023); and the Learning Estate Strategy, which provides a detailed roadmap for the development and transformation of learning environments (Scottish Government, 2019; Education Scotland, 2023).

From the Learning Estate Strategy emerge two focused sub-strategies: the Rural Schools Strategy and the Learning Centre Strategy. The Rural Schools Strategy 2026 addresses the unique challenges of delivering education in remote areas, promoting equity and sustainability (Fargas-Malet & Bagley, 2023; OECD, 2019). The Learning Centre Strategy supports the creation of inclusive, flexible, and digitally enabled hubs that cater to diverse learner needs (Scottish Government, 2021; Education Scotland, 2023). These strategies are designed to deliver tangible educational benefits across four key areas: Early Learning and Childcare, Primary Education, Secondary Education, and Enhanced Provision (Scottish Government, 2020).

Early Learning and Childcare is guided by a blueprint review that focuses on expanding access, improving flexibility, and enhancing quality (Scottish Government, 2020a; Audit Scotland, 2018). In Primary Education, a reimagined school model supports various configurations, including ordinary three-class schools and rural two-class schools, while avoiding single-teacher solutions to ensure resilience and educational quality (Fargas-Malet & Bagley, 2021; Wilson et al., 2006). Secondary Education emphasizes a three-stage model, targets 85% utilisation of facilities, and enhances the curricular offer to support diverse learner pathways (OECD, 2019; Scottish Government, 2023). Enhanced Provision expands support for learners with additional needs through autism spaces and innovative online and networking solutions (Education Scotland, 2023; Scottish Parliament SPICe, 2020).

> "The learning estate is not just about buildings; it is about ensuring the best outcomes for Scotland's children and young people."
>
> Scottish Futures Trust, 2021

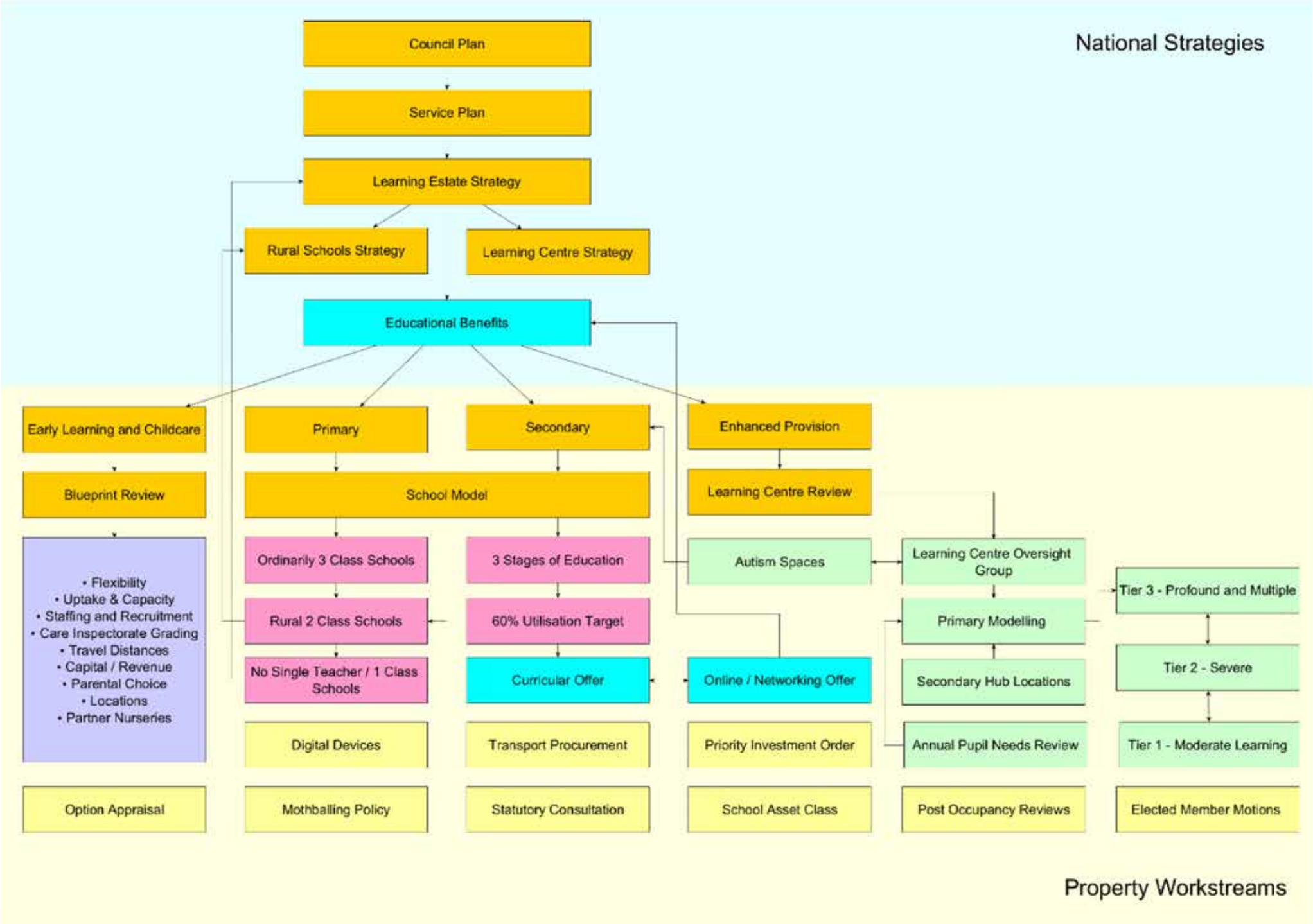
To support these educational goals, a series of property-focused workstreams ensure that infrastructure and resources are aligned with strategic priorities (Scottish Government, 2019; Audit Scotland, 2008). For Early Learning and Childcare, these workstreams address capacity building,

3. Strategy Hierarchy (cont'd)

staffing and recruitment, regulatory compliance, travel distances, and parental choice through robust option appraisals (Scottish Government, 2020a). In Primary Education, the focus is on digital inclusion, policy alignment in core subjects, efficient transport and procurement systems, and statutory consultations to engage communities (Scottish Government, 2010; Dumfries and Galloway Council, 2023c). Secondary Education workstreams prioritize investment based on asset condition and strategic need, ensuring facilities support modern learning (Audit Scotland, 2008; Scottish Government, 2023). Enhanced Provision is overseen by the Learning Centre Oversight Group and includes annual pupil needs reviews, post-occupancy evaluations, and the development of tiered support models, with elected member engagement in key decisions (Dumfries and Galloway Council, 2023; Education Scotland, 2023).

Together, these strategic and operational elements form a cohesive and forward-looking approach to educational planning in Dumfries and Galloway, ensuring that learners, educators, and communities are supported by a learning estate that is inclusive, sustainable, and fit for learning in the 21st century (OECD, 2015; Scottish Government & COSLA, 2019).

The strategy hierarchy is summarised in the figure below, and this structure ensures that strategic ambition translates into tangible improvements for learners, teachers, and communities, consistent with the 'Connecting People, Places and Learning' ethos (Scottish Government, 2019).


National Strategies
Council Plan
Service Plan
Learning Estate Strategy
Rural Schools Strategy
Learning Centre Strategy
Educational Benefits
Early Learning and Childcare
Primary
Secondary
Enhanced Provision
Blueprint Review
School Model
Learning Centre Review
• Flexibility
• Uptake & Capacity
• Staffing and Recruitment
• Care Inspectorate Grading
• Travel Distances
• Capital / Revenue
• Parental Choice
• Locations
• Partner Nurseries
Ordinarily 3 Class Schools
3 Stages of Education
Autism Spaces
Learning Centre Oversight Group
Tier 3 - Profound and Multiple
Rural 2 Class Schools
60% Utilisation Target
Primary Modelling
Tier 2 - Severe
No Single Teacher / 1 Class Schools
Curricular Offer
Online / Networking Offer
Secondary Hub Locations
Digital Devices
Transport Procurement
Priority Investment Order
Annual Pupil Needs Review
Tier 1 - Moderate Learning
Option Appraisal
Mothballing Policy
Statutory Consultation
School Asset Class
Post Occupancy Reviews
Elected Member Motions
Property Workstreams

4. Council Priorities and Commitments

Dumfries and Galloway Council has established a clear vision for a successful region built on fairness, opportunity, and high-quality public services. To achieve this, we have agreed four strategic priorities that guide the delivery of all services and shape our long-term ambitions. Each of these priorities is closely linked to the need for a modern, inclusive, and future-ready Learning Estate Strategy (DGC Council Plan 2023–2028).

We are committed to building the local economy by supporting sustainable growth, investing in infrastructure, and creating opportunities for employment and enterprise. A modern learning estate is essential to this goal, as it helps develop a skilled, adaptable workforce equipped to meet the demands of a changing economy. This aligns with the Regional Economic Strategy and the National Strategy for Economic Transformation (Scottish Government, 2022), which highlight the role of education in enabling regional growth and innovation. By investing in high-quality educational facilities and digital infrastructure, we create environments that support innovation, attract families and businesses, and provide young people with the tools they need to succeed.

We aim to provide the best start in life for all our children by ensuring access to high-quality education, early years support, and inclusive learning environments. High-quality early learning environments are proven to narrow the attainment gap and support lifelong wellbeing, aligning with the Scottish Government's statement that 'the earliest years of life are crucial for every child and impact on their future outcomes' (Blueprint for 2020, Scottish Government, 2017).

The Learning Estate Strategy underpins this commitment by delivering safe, inspiring, and accessible spaces for learning from early years through to secondary education, consistent with the National Improvement Framework (Scottish Government, 2023) and the universal goals of Getting it Right for Every Child (GIRFEC). These environments are designed to support all children–regardless of background or location–in reaching their full potential.

We are determined to protect our most vulnerable people by delivering compassionate, person-centred services that promote dignity, independence, and wellbeing. A well-planned and inclusive learning estate plays a vital role in supporting vulnerable children and young people. Through enhanced provision, accessible facilities, and integrated support services, the Council aligns with the principles set out in the Additional Support for Learning Act 2004 and the Equality Act 2010, helping to meet the needs of those with additional support requirements, reduce inequalities, and promote resilience across our communities.

4. Council Priorities and Commitments (cont'd)

> "We are committed to building thriving, resilient communities, with education at the heart of wellbeing and economic growth."
>
> Dumfries and Galloway Council Plan, 2023

We strive to be an inclusive Council by embedding equality, transparency, and community participation in everything we do. Our approach is rooted in the Participation Framework, which emphasises the need for local authorities to 'engage communities early and meaningfully in the decisions that affect them' (Scottish Government, 2021).

The Learning Estate Strategy reflects this commitment by engaging communities in the planning and design of learning spaces (consistent with the Participation Framework, Scottish Government, 2021), promoting digital inclusion (as set out in the National Digital Strategy, 2021), and ensuring that all learners feel valued and supported. In doing so, we are building an education system–and a Council–that is inclusive, transparent, and responsive to the needs of all (Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015).

Our commitment to children and young people is central to these priorities. We are determined to give every child and young person in Dumfries and Galloway an equal opportunity to thrive. This includes a strong focus on safeguarding, supporting vulnerable learners, and improving health and wellbeing outcomes in line with the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014. We are also committed to closing the attainment gap, as set out in the Scottish Attainment Challenge and Education Recovery Plan (Scottish Government, 2021), and ensuring that all learners can access a broad, relevant, and future-focused curriculum.

Significant progress is being made through strategic investments such as Dumfries Learning Town, which is transforming the educational experience for over 6,000 learners across the region. This is complemented by the successful implementation of the 1140 hours Early Learning and Childcare expansion, and targeted investment in primary schools including Park, Gatehouse, Kelloholm, Laurieknowe, and Lochmaben. These developments are not only improving facilities but also enhancing educational outcomes and community cohesion (Early Learning and Childcare Statutory Guidance, 2021).

4. Council Priorities and Commitments (cont'd)

The delivery of these priorities relies on effective collaboration across Council services, particularly between education, planning, property, and community partners. Our Learning Estate Strategy is a key enabler of this work, supporting the Council's wider ambitions through a series of integrated actions:

- Developing a skilled and adaptable workforce for the future
- Rationalising and modernising our estate to deliver fewer, better assets
- Sustaining high-quality services through periods of change
- Enhancing communication and engagement with stakeholders
- Maximising value through strategic procurement
- Building sustainable and resilient finances
- Meeting customer needs efficiently and effectively
- Promoting equality, diversity, and inclusion
- Ensuring meaningful community participation in decision-making
- Leading innovation in digital learning and service delivery

4. Council Priorities and Commitments (cont'd)

The Learning Estate Strategy is not a standalone document but part of a broader ecosystem of Council strategies and plans. It is closely aligned with the School Estate Management Plan, Regional Economic Strategy, ICT and Digital Strategy, Financial Strategy, Workforce Strategy, Regional Transport Strategy, Carbon Management Plan, and the Education Authority Annual Plan. Together, these frameworks ensure that our learning environments are not only fit for purpose but also contribute to the wider social, economic, and environmental goals of Dumfries and Galloway (National Planning Framework 4, Scottish Government, 2023; Place Principle, Scottish Government & COSLA, 2019).

COUNCIL PRIORITIES AND COMMITMENTS KEY POINTS

Education as a Driver of Growth: A modern learning estate supports economic development by preparing a skilled, adaptable workforce.

Best Start in Life: High-quality early years and school environments help close the attainment gap and support lifelong wellbeing.

Support for Vulnerable Learners: Inclusive, accessible schools ensure all children, including those with additional needs, are supported to thrive.

Community Engagement: The strategy promotes transparency, equality, and meaningful participation in school planning and design.

Integrated Planning: The Learning Estate Strategy aligns with wider Council strategies to deliver efficient, sustainable, and community-focused services.

5. Aims And Objectives

Dumfries and Galloway Council has established a clear vision for a successful region built on fairness, opportunity, and high-quality public services. To achieve this, we have agreed four strategic priorities that guide the delivery of all services and shape our long-term ambitions. Each of these priorities is closely linked to the need for a modern, inclusive, and future-ready Learning Estate Strategy (DGC Council Plan 2023–2028).

We are committed to building the local economy by supporting sustainable growth, investing in infrastructure, and creating opportunities for employment and enterprise. A modern learning estate is essential to this goal, as it helps develop a skilled, adaptable workforce equipped to meet the demands of a changing economy. This aligns with the Regional Economic Strategy and the National Strategy for Economic Transformation (Scottish Government, 2022), which highlight the role of education in enabling regional growth and innovation. By investing in high-quality educational facilities and digital infrastructure, we create environments that support innovation, attract families and businesses, and provide young people with the tools they need to succeed.

We aim to provide the best start in life for all our children by ensuring access to high-quality education, early years support, and inclusive learning environments. High-quality early learning environments are proven to narrow the attainment gap and support lifelong wellbeing, aligning with the Scottish Government's statement that 'the earliest years of life are crucial for every child and impact on their future outcomes' (Blueprint for 2020, Scottish Government, 2017).

The Learning Estate Strategy underpins this commitment by delivering safe, inspiring, and accessible spaces for learning from early years through to secondary education, consistent with the National Improvement Framework (Scottish Government, 2023) and the universal goals of Getting it Right for Every Child (GIRFEC). These environments are designed to support all children-regardless of background or location–in reaching their full potential.

We are determined to protect our most vulnerable people by delivering compassionate, person-centred services that promote dignity, independence, and wellbeing. A well-planned and inclusive learning estate plays a vital role in supporting vulnerable children and young people. Through enhanced provision, accessible facilities, and integrated support services, the Council aligns with the principles set out in the Additional Support for Learning Act 2004 and the Equality Act 2010, helping to meet the needs of those with additional support requirements, reduce inequalities, and promote resilience across our communities.

5. Aims And Objectives (cont'd)

The vision statement for The Learning Estate Strategy is clear – to improve outcomes for all school aged children across Dumfries and Galloway. This vision has been encapsulated in 6 elements that draw on national guidance and examples of good practice in a way that captures the complex nature of schools and the many functions they serve to their local communities. The vision and aspirations should and will inform decisions taken regarding the strategic planning of the future school estate.

In response, the Council has identified six core elements that guide the long-term design and planning of its future learning estate:

Our Schools are Fit for Purpose

- School buildings include dynamic, creative and flexible learning environments that allow all children and young people to explore new learning styles.
- School buildings are able to deliver the principles of Curriculum for Excellence as well as extended and life-long learning.
- School buildings are modern with access to remote learning which expand the use of technology in learning.

Our Schools Serve Young People

- School buildings contribute to the improvement in attainment, literacy and numeracy and health and wellbeing of all children and young people.
- School buildings support the closing of the attainment gap between the most and least disadvantaged children and young people.
- School buildings actively improve employability skills and sustained, positive school-leaver destinations for all young people.

Our Schools are Sustainable

- School buildings are the right size for the catchment areas they serve, now and for the future.
- School building operating costs are efficient and sustainable.
- Management and staffing costs in primary and secondary schools are proportionate and have parity.

5. Aims And Objectives (cont'd)

Our Schools are Equal

- School buildings are welcoming, accessible, and inclusive places to all children and young people, including those with disabilities.
- School buildings offer equality of opportunity to children and young people for personal achievement and attainment.
- School buildings offer consistently high standards of condition and suitability.

Our Schools are Future-Proofed

- Analysis of longer-term community needs to ensure that schools are better able to meet those needs and deliver an appropriate range of services for years to come.
- School buildings are sustainable, energy, waste, and water efficient, with low carbon footprints and are responsive and resilient to the effects of climate change.
- The school estate is efficiently run and maximises value for money.

Our Schools Serve their Communities

- School buildings are a genuine community resource, hub and focus for community life and activity.
- School buildings provide (or through which are provided) the right range of services to their communities' needs.
- Where appropriate, school estates should include scope for a 2-18 provision on the same site.

These elements enable us to make informed, evidence-based decisions about where, how, and why investment should be prioritised across the estate. They also reflect a commitment to community participation, as required by the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015 and the Participation Framework (Scottish Government, 2021).

> "The learning estate should support and enhance learning and teaching, be flexible to accommodate change, and should be efficiently run and sustainable."
>
> Scotland's Learning Estate Strategy, 2019

To deliver high-quality education services and ensure long-term value from our assets, Dumfries and Galloway Council will continue to apply a range of capital investment solutions focused on optimising the performance of our existing school buildings. These priorities reflect our statutory duties under the Standards in Scotland's Schools etc. Act 2000 and the imperative to deliver best value (Local Government in Scotland Act 2003).

5. Aims And Objectives (cont'd)

Our approach to maintaining the existing school estate is underpinned by the following core investment standards applied through the Learning Estate Management Plan (Scottish Government, 2019; Audit Scotland, 2008; Education Scotland, 2023):

Compliance and Condition

We are committed to providing a safe, secure, and legally compliant environment for all who learn and work in our schools (Scottish Government, 2019; Scottish Government, 2023). This includes regular condition surveys, proactive maintenance, and timely upgrades to meet health and safety standards, fire regulations, and building codes (Audit Scotland, 2008; Scottish Futures Trust, 2020). Ensuring that our buildings are structurally sound and fit for purpose is a non-negotiable foundation for educational success (Education Scotland, 2023).

Suitability

Our schools must support the delivery of a modern curriculum and meet the diverse needs of learners (OECD, 2015; Education Scotland, 2023). This means investing in flexible, inclusive spaces that accommodate a range of teaching methods, specialist learning areas, digital infrastructure, and support services (Scottish Government, 2020; OECD, 2020). Suitability also includes ensuring that facilities promote wellbeing, creativity, and collaboration–enabling learners to thrive in environments that are inspiring and adaptable (Bagley & Hargreaves, 2018; OECD, 2019).

Sufficiency

We will ensure that our schools are in the right locations and have the capacity to meet current and projected demand (National Records of Scotland, 2022; Scottish Government, 2023). This involves careful analysis of demographic trends, enrolment forecasts, and community needs (Scottish Government & COSLA, 2019; Scottish Parliament SPICe, 2020). Where necessary, we will reconfigure or consolidate provision to ensure that resources are used efficiently and that all learners have access to high-quality education close to home (Audit Scotland, 2008; OECD, 2019).

Sustainability

Our investment decisions will take a long-term, whole-life approach to asset management (Scottish Government, 2021). This includes designing for durability, energy efficiency, and low maintenance, as well as aligning with our climate change objectives (Scottish Government, 2024; Scottish Futures Trust, 2020). We are committed to reducing the carbon footprint of our school estate and will prioritise projects that support net-zero targets, renewable energy integration, and sustainable construction practices (Scottish Government, 2021; Education Scotland, 2023).

5. Aims And Objectives (cont'd)

Accessibility

All learners, staff, and visitors must be able to access our schools with dignity and ease (Children and Young People's Commissioner Scotland, 2020; Scottish Government, 2021). We will continue to remove physical, sensory, and digital barriers to participation by ensuring that our buildings comply with accessibility standards and are inclusive by design (Scottish Government, 2010; Education Scotland, 2023). This includes accessible entrances, classrooms, toilets, and circulation spaces, as well as digital connectivity that supports remote and blended learning (Scottish Government, 2020; OECD, 2020).

Together, these principles form the foundation of a strategic, data-informed approach to managing the school estate (Audit Scotland, 2008; OECD, 2015). They ensure that every investment contributes to a learning environment that is safe, inclusive, sustainable, and aligned with the educational and social ambitions of Dumfries and Galloway (Scottish Government & COSLA, 2019; Education Scotland, 2023).

6. Rural Schools Strategy

Dumfries and Galloway Council recognises the vital role rural schools play in sustaining local communities, promoting place-based identity, and ensuring equitable access to education across a diverse geography. This Rural School Strategy 2026 – 2031 sets out the Council's approach to supporting rural provision, grounded in educational value, social cohesion, and strategic feasibility. It builds on the aims and objectives of the Learning Estate Strategy and reflects the wider national policy landscape, including the Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010, the Place Principle (Scottish Government & COSLA, 2019), and the Council's own School Model and School Transport Policy.

The strategy takes full account of research that demonstrates how small rural schools can serve as anchors of community identity and resilience. However, it also recognises the demographic, financial and staffing pressures facing rural education, especially in the context of long-term population decline.

> "Education is a key driver in supporting population retention and economic development in rural and island communities."
>
> Scottish Government Addressing Depopulation Action Plan, 2024

Depopulation remains a defining challenge for Dumfries and Galloway and other rural areas across Scotland. The region has experienced consistent outward migration of young people, declining birth rates, and an ageing population - all of which place pressure on the viability of small schools. The IFS projects a fall of 90,000 school pupils in Scotland by 2040, with rural authorities most affected. Academic literature confirms that this decline is linked not only to wider economic trends but also to reduced access to essential services such as education.

Scottish Government policy, including Supporting and Enabling Sustainable Communities (2023), acknowledges that high-quality education is a key determinant of population retention in rural areas. Education provision must therefore be responsive, sustainable, and of high quality to support rural regeneration.

6. Rural Schools Strategy (cont'd)

The following four commitments shape Dumfries and Galloway's Rural Schools Strategy:

1. Support for Viable Two-Class Schools in Remote Rural Areas

Dumfries and Galloway Council is committed to supporting viable two-class schools in remote rural areas, while not supporting the continuation or creation of single-class (one-teacher) schools. This reflects the Council's strategic goal of ensuring the right school in the right place and aligns with our broader aims of maintaining quality in learning and teaching, professional support, and equity of learner experience.

- Educational and Professional Quality: Research highlights the risks of single-teacher schools, including limited peer interaction, restricted curriculum access, and professional isolation. Two-class schools offer a more balanced learning environment and enable staff collaboration, shared planning, and improved wellbeing.
- Community and Place-Based Value: Rural schools act as anchors of community life. While they may have higher per-pupil costs, the Council views this as a necessary investment in social infrastructure and place-based equity, consistent with the Place Principle (Scottish Government & COSLA, 2019).
- Viability and Sustainability: The Council recognises a lower enrolment threshold below which a school may become critically small and no longer educationally or financially viable. The School Model provides the framework to regularly assess rural school viability based on condition, suitability, occupancy, and educational quality.

This principle aligns with the Council's commitment to maintaining quality in learning and teaching, professional collegiality, and equity of learner experience.

2. Maintaining Access Through School Transport

All learners in rural areas are entitled to equitable access to education through appropriate transport provision. This is underpinned by the Council's School Transport Policy 2023:

- Equity of Access: Pupils in rural and remote communities must not be disadvantaged due to geography. The Council ensures that primary pupils ordinarily travel no more than 30 minutes, and secondary pupils no more than 45 minutes, from a designated pick-up point.
- Safeguarding and Wellbeing: School transport policies are designed with safeguarding, punctuality, and wellbeing in mind.
- Sustainability: Where feasible, transport solutions will align with low-carbon principles, consistent with the Council's wider environmental aims.

6. Rural Schools Strategy (cont'd)

- This principle helps mitigate the challenges of school consolidation or reconfiguration in sparsely populated areas.

3. Early and Ongoing Community Engagement

Rural communities must have meaningful opportunities to shape decisions affecting local schools.

- Statutory Process: All proposals for changes to rural schools must follow the Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010, which mandates enhanced consultation, including pre-consultation and Educational Benefits Statements.
- Temporary Closure (Mothballing): The Council's procedures on Mothballing ensures that early engagement takes place with local communities before a mothballing decision is made, in line with guidance from Education Scotland and Audit Scotland.
- Appraisal Engagement: The School Model includes early-stage engagement with stakeholders as part of all option appraisals for rural provision, ensuring that community views are embedded from the outset.
- This approach supports the Council's obligations under the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015 and reflects best practice in participatory decision-making.

4. Digital Solutions for Enhanced Learning and Support

The Council supports the deployment of digital solutions to enhance educational quality and staff support in rural schools.

- Strategic Framework: This commitment is embedded in the Digital Strategy 2021–2026 (Dumfries and Galloway Council), which aims to promote connectivity, reduce digital exclusion, and support innovation in service delivery.
- Curriculum Access: Remote learning platforms allow rural learners to access specialist subjects or teaching not available on-site, in line with Scotland's Digital Learning and Teaching Strategy.
- Staff Support: Digital platforms can also support teacher networks, professional learning, and peer collaboration, reduce isolation and improve retention.

6. Rural Schools Strategy (cont'd)

The Council will continue to expand access to blended learning tools and digital infrastructure as an integral part of sustainable rural provision.

Dumfries and Galloway's Rural Schools Strategy reflects a commitment to rural equity, community empowerment, and educational quality. It acknowledges the unique value of small rural schools while setting realistic parameters to ensure their long-term sustainability. Through a blend of strategic planning, meaningful engagement, and targeted investment, the Council will continue to support rural provision where it is educationally, financially, and socially justified.

7. Learning Centre Strategy

Dumfries and Galloway Council is committed to delivering an inclusive education system that meets the needs of all learners, including those requiring additional support, by embedding enhanced ASN provision within the learning estate (Scottish Government, 2023a). This approach aligns with the Education (Additional Support for Learning) (Scotland) Act 2004 and the Scottish Government's presumption of mainstreaming, which emphasises that "children and young people must be listened to … in all decision making relating to additional support for learning" (Scottish Government, 2019a).

Learning Centres will adopt a tiered support model aligned with the national Additional Support for Learning Action Plan, providing universal, targeted, and specialist interventions that strengthen local provision and reduce the need for out-of-area placements (Scottish Government, 2020a). In line with Scotland's focus on building whole-school capacity, these centres will act as hubs of professional learning and inclusion, supporting schools to develop autism-informed practices, trauma-aware approaches, and a culture of wellbeing that benefits all learners (Scottish Government, 2021b). The Scottish Government's guidance on fostering positive, inclusive, and safe environments underpins this commitment, ensuring that our learning spaces promote dignity, equity, and resilience (Scottish Government, 2017).

Future-focused design will prioritise flexible, autism-friendly infrastructure across the estate, ensuring that calm zones, sensory spaces, quiet rooms, and adaptable classrooms are part of both new builds and refurbishments (Scottish Futures Trust, 2020; Education Scotland, 2023). This will support a graduated approach to inclusion, allowing learners to access targeted support within their local schools while maintaining strong connections to their peers and communities (OECD, 2019). The Learning Centres will also facilitate structured transitions across key stages, ensuring continuity in support plans, collaborative working with families, and the removal of barriers that can disrupt the educational experience for children and young people with additional needs (Scottish Government, 2023b).

> "We will support every child to be safe, healthy, achieving, nurtured, active, respected, responsible, and included."
>
> Dumfries and Galloway Children's Services Plan, 2023

Our approach to enhanced ASN provision aligns closely with the Dumfries and Galloway School Model, providing necessary support to rural two-class schools and ensuring that even the most remote learners can access high-quality, specialist provision locally (Dumfries and Galloway Council, 2023). By utilising digital tools and virtual learning environments, Learning Centres will facilitate networked learning where required and reduce the need for excessive travel, supporting the principles of sustainability and accessibility within the Learning Estate Strategy (Scottish Government, 2021c; OECD, 2020).

7. Learning Centre Strategy (cont'd)

Governance of this approach will be managed through multi-agency oversight, including education, health, social work, and third-sector partners, ensuring that the Learning Centres reflect the needs of communities while aligning with local and national priorities (Scottish Government, 2020b). Annual audits will identify trends in ASN demand and inform the investment pipeline within the Capital Programme, ensuring that resources are targeted effectively to where they are most needed (Audit Scotland, 2008). Evaluation will be embedded within the delivery model, using outcomes such as attendance, wellbeing, and attainment to measure success and drive continuous improvement (Education Scotland, 2023).

By embedding this Learning Centre Strategy within the wider Learning Estate Strategy, Dumfries and Galloway Council will deliver a place-based, inclusive education system that meets the needs of all learners while aligning with national commitments to equity and excellence (Scottish Government & COSLA, 2019). It will ensure that every child and young person, regardless of need or postcode, has access to a supportive, adaptable, and high-quality learning environment, securing positive outcomes and enabling our learners to thrive in an inclusive, forward-looking education system (Scottish Government, 2023b; OECD, 2015).

LEARNING CENTRE STRATEGY KEY POINTS

Inclusive Support Hubs: Learning Centres provide targeted and specialist support for learners with additional needs, reducing reliance on out-of-area placements.

Flexible, Autism-Friendly Design: New and refurbished spaces will include sensory rooms, quiet zones, and adaptable classrooms to support wellbeing and inclusion.

Multi-Agency Collaboration: Education, health, social work, and third-sector partners will work together to ensure services meet local needs.

Evidence-Based Investment: Annual audits and outcome tracking will guide capital investment and continuous improvement across the learning estate.

8. The School Model

Dumfries and Galloway Council have the responsibility to prepare strategic and local development plans that allow for extensive public engagement of the need for and location of new schools or the improvement and maintenance of existing ones. Authorities must balance this with the fulfilment of their statutory duties to maintain a sufficiency of accommodation and secure the efficient provision of school education (Education (Scotland) Act 1980, Section 1) whilst taking into account the needs and wishes of people and communities (Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015; Participation Framework, Scottish Government 2021).

Formulaic measurement of what constitutes 'sufficiency' in any given locality is perhaps the most challenging measure of all, because so many factors will bear on that judgement or decision. Therefore, an agreed School Model, at least in principle, will allow for the identification and prioritisation of investment required for the region's school estate going forward.

> "We are redesigning our services to be more sustainable, efficient, and focused on the needs of our communities."
>
> Dumfries and Galloway Council Transformation Programme, 2019

The School Model therefore does not prescribe a fixed outcome for every school but enables flexible and proportionate responses. It helps to:

- Highlight expectations with stakeholders, identify the options and refine the objectives based on the widest possible evidence base;
- Further improve general understanding of option appraisal processes and cost-benefit analysis and why proposals for changes to the configuration of the school estate must be considered; and
- Show the 'opportunity cost' and short-term versus long-term implications of such proposals that require change.

School capital projects are enablers in making change happen – rarely can they address all the issues without some additional changes to how a school community manages and organises itself. In the same way, some issues may not need physical change in order to see improvements, and this will be reflected in the 'tiered' nature of the School Model output and its recommended Asset Appraisal Options. The process of refining existing spaces and/or developing new spaces may also address some of the key issues such as encouraging staff to work collaboratively in new ways, strengthening relationships with parents and community users, or increasing student voice and participation.

8. The School Model (cont'd)

The School Model is one of a number of benchmarking and option appraisal tools that will ensure that capital resources are focussed on the provision of assets deemed to deliver the most efficient, effective and economic approach.

The key aims of the School Model include:

1. Investment proposals draw on robust data, option appraisal and transparency in prioritisation.
2. Facilitate joint and cross-service working.
3. Establish a clear framework for managing and monitoring the capital programme aligned with the principle of 'best value'.
4. Demonstrate and communicate to stakeholders, through effective reporting, the performance of both on-going and completed projects.

A region-wide consultation in 2023 engaged headteachers, education officers, parents, and community partners to shape the principles that underpin this methodology. Their collective input ensures that the Model reflects local values and educational ambitions while supporting strategic alignment with national policy. The School Model includes ten core Principles, weighted to reflect educational priorities. These represent agreed aspirations for the shape and standard of school provision across the region and act as reference points when appraising schools and shaping long-term estate planning.

The Principles are weighted, with the priority for review starting at the top of the list.

School Model Principles

1. Pupils should be educated in facilities which are rated at least category B for each of Condition and Suitability.
2. Primary pupils should not ordinarily be required to travel for longer than 30 minutes from the nearest classified road pick-up point to school.
3. Secondary pupils should not ordinarily be required to travel for longer than 45 minutes from the nearest classified road pick-up point to school.
4. To enhance high quality social and educational experiences, primary schools should ordinarily support 3 classes and have composite classes of no greater than 3-year groups.
5. To enhance high quality social and educational experiences, secondary schools should ordinarily support a 2-form entry (2 registration classes in S1).
6. Teachers should be members of a professional learning community comprising of at least 3 FTE members based at the same school.
7. Schools should have an occupancy rate where possible greater than 60% utilisation of the capacity of the school and ideally should be operating at 80% utilisation.

8. The School Model (cont'd)

8. All schools should be adaptable to children, staff, and visitors with disabilities.
9. All schools should support community use where required in the local context.
10. All schools should have key facilities including a hall, dining area, staff room, school office and grass playing fields as appropriate to the size and scale of the school.

> "The school estate should be flexible to meet the needs of communities now and in the future."
>
> Scotland's Learning Estate Strategy, 2019

These principles reflect legal duties (e.g. accessibility, travel time fairness), educational research, and community expectations. They align with the Scottish Government's Learning Estate Strategy (2019) and the Dumfries and Galloway School Estate Planning Framework (2023).

The following additional factors were also considered when determining the Principles as listed above (including, but not limited to):

- Statutory legislation for class sizes and teacher numbers/ratios.
- Compliance with statutory and regulatory requirements relating to schools.
- Proportional weighting of responses from school specialists and users.
- Compatibility with the Learning Estate Strategy and School Estate Management Plan.
- The provision of good value for money to our citizens.
- Council policy on school matters including mothballing, pupil enrolment and staffing.

The School Model will contain ongoing Review Triggers where schools may be reviewed in the future if they meet one or more of the following criteria:

- A change of 25% or more in the school roll within one academic year.
- A Primary school drops below 3 classes.
- A Secondary school no longer supports 2-form entry.
- The occupancy rate of a school drops below 60% utilisation.
- The building reaches 95% capacity.
- There is a change to a school with a neighbouring catchment area which may alter demand for places.
- The Condition/Suitability of a school drops below a 'B' rating.
- The building is not accessible for those who require it.

8. The School Model (cont'd)

- There is a significant change in the catchment area which may alter demand for places e.g., a significant housing development.

These triggers allow the Model to remain dynamic and responsive to change, ensuring that early action can be taken where required.

Ultimately, the School Model is not a standalone framework–it is a methodology embedded within a broader Learning Estate Strategy to ensure the aims and objectives can be met. It ensures that all decisions regarding school infrastructure are learner-centred, evidence-based, and strategically aligned with Dumfries and Galloway Council's ambition for an inclusive, sustainable and high-quality education system.

THE SCHOOL MODEL KEY POINTS

Flexible Framework: The School Model guides decisions on school size, structure, and investment without prescribing one-size-fits-all solutions.

Evidence-Based Planning: Decisions are based on data such as enrolment trends, building condition, and community needs to ensure best value and educational quality.

Clear Principles: Ten weighted principles (e.g. travel time, occupancy, accessibility) help assess and prioritise schools for review or investment.

Option Appraisal for Review: When a school is flagged due to issues like poor building condition or declining pupil numbers, a structured option appraisal is undertaken.

Community-Driven: Developed through region-wide consultation, the model reflects local values and supports transparent, learner-centred planning.

9. Option Appraisal Process

Option appraisal is a critical tool in ensuring that permanent changes to the school estate are evidence-based, strategically aligned, and deliver long-term value. By systematically evaluating a range of potential solutions, Dumfries and Galloway Council ensures that decisions balance educational outcomes, financial prudence, and community needs - consistent with its statutory Best Value duties under the Local Government in Scotland Act 2003.

A key advantage of this approach is its focus on sustainability. In line with the Learning Estate Strategy (Scottish Government, 2019) and National Planning Framework 4 (Scottish Government, 2023), appraisals consider whole-life costs, carbon footprint, and energy efficiency - supporting the Council's commitment to climate resilience and net zero targets.

Option appraisal also enhances efficiency, as recommended by Audit Scotland's Options Appraisal Best Value Guide (2014). It allows the Council to identify underutilised assets, consolidate provision where appropriate, and optimise existing infrastructure. This approach enables better space utilisation, reduced operational costs, and the reinvestment of savings into core learning environments - aligned with the "fewer, better buildings" principle in Building Better Schools (Scottish Government, 2009).

Affordability is embedded throughout the process. Following the five-case model in HM Treasury's Green Book (2022), early-stage financial modelling and risk analysis ensure that any proposed investment is financially viable and aligned with the Council's wider capital strategy, helping avoid overcommitment of public funds. Option appraisal supports quality by setting clear, consistent criteria for condition and suitability -anchored in national benchmarking frameworks such as School Estate Core Facts. This ensures that the estate supports modern pedagogy, promotes inclusion, and delivers environments conducive to high-quality learning and teaching.

For a region with a dispersed rural population, the option appraisal process is particularly effective in evaluating the complexities of rural provision. It supports nuanced analysis of travel times, catchment viability, and demographic trends - aligned with principles in the National Islands Plan (Scottish Government, 2019) and SPICe's Education in Remote and Rural Communities briefing (Scottish Parliament, 2020) - ensuring that rural learners are not disadvantaged.

9. Option Appraisal Process (cont'd)

> "The guidance supports the analysis of proposals to ensure they are developed in a way that delivers the best social value to society, including wider social and environmental aspects, whilst supporting the design-making process for policy and projects to deliver best value for money for taxpayers."
>
> HM Treasury, 2022

Option appraisal also ensures equity and transparency, supporting duties under the Equality Act 2010 and the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015. By applying objective, published criteria and involving stakeholders in early-stage planning, the process helps address disparities in access, quality, and opportunity across the region.

The option appraisal process begins with a clearly defined need - such as insufficient capacity, poor condition, or projected demographic change. Where feasible, issues are first assessed for resolution within existing resources, avoiding unnecessary capital investment. This focus on the problem, not the solution, aligns with Green Book guidance on appraisal objectivity and proportionality.

The strategic context is then reviewed to ensure alignment with the Council Plan, Learning Estate Strategy, and wider strategies such as the Carbon Management Plan, Financial Strategy, and Education Authority Annual Plan. Clear and measurable objectives are established to guide the appraisal, covering time, cost, quality, and educational impact.

A wide range of potential options is identified, including "do nothing" and "do minimum" baselines. Unrealistic or non-viable options are ruled out with documented justification to maintain transparency and public confidence.

Options are then assessed through a combination of quantitative and qualitative criteria, including educational outcomes, value for money, and stakeholder benefit. A risk-adjusted, sensitivity-tested comparison is used to ensure robustness, following Green Book expectations for sound decision-making.

From this, a shortlist of viable options is developed, leading to the selection of a preferred option based on its deliverability, affordability, and alignment with long-term demand and community priorities. An initial affordability check is then conducted, ensuring proposals are consistent with the Council's capital strategy.

The final preferred option and supporting business case are then submitted to Elected Members of the Education, Skills and Community Wellbeing Committee for democratic scrutiny and approval–ensuring that the process is transparent, evidence-based, and accountable to the communities it serves.

An outline for the Option Appraisal process is below:

1. Identify Need or Problem	Define the problem or need clearly, as this forms the foundation of the entire appraisal. Start from a statement of the problem that is to be solved, not a preconceived idea of what the solution might be.
2. Consider Strategic Context	The appraisal must be placed in its strategic context. This should refer to the aims and objectives of the Council, the Learning Estate Strategy, the capital and strategic project plans, and other relevant policies.
3. Define Objectives	Set clear, measurable objectives that define the scope and success criteria of the project, aligned with strategic aims. Avoid overly narrow or overly broad goals, and treat technical details like location or build type as options—not fixed requirements.
4. Desktop Review	Gather and analyse all relevant data on the school and wider estate where relevant to build a clear picture of current conditions, usage, and future needs. This evidence base will inform the appraisal and ensure decisions are grounded in accurate, up-to-date information.
5. Identify Wide Range of Options	Begin by exploring a broad and imaginative range of possible solutions, involving a multidisciplinary team, key stakeholders, and the wider community through informal conversations to ensure all viable ideas and local insights are considered.
6. Identify Shortlist of Options	Narrow down to a realistic shortlist by assessing each option against the agreed criteria, including a mandatory 'do nothing' and 'do minimum' baseline for comparison. Discard options that are clearly unfeasible, with transparent justification.
7. Select Preferred Solution	From the shortlisted options, identify a preferred solution by assessing viability, demand, and affordability through more detailed anaylsis. The preferred solution must be viable.
8. Determine Affordability	Estimate the financing costs of the preferred solution to assess whether it fits within the Council's financial strategy. If it proves unaffordable, consider alternative funding approaches, scaling the project, or selecting the next best viable option.
9. Seek Agreement from Members	Present the preferred option and supporting business case to Elected Members with enough detail to explain the available choices and rationale. Approval must be based on a clear understanding of the options and the reasoning behind the recommended solution.

10. Learning Estate Management Plan (LEMP)

The Dumfries and Galloway Learning Estate Management Plan (LEMP) operationalises the Learning Estate Strategy by providing a clear, annually updated, data-driven framework for managing the school estate in alignment with national policy and local priorities (Scottish Government, 2019; Education Scotland, 2023). It ensures that investment decisions are evidence-based, transparent, and strategically focused on delivering high-quality, sustainable learning environments that meet the needs of our communities.

The LEMP forms a core part of the Council's Transformation Programme, directly supporting the aim of delivering "fewer but better" assets that are sustainable, efficient, and future-proofed. It ensures the learning estate supports modern educational delivery while maximising value for money and aligning with community needs (Scottish Futures Trust, 2020; Scottish Government, 2024).

The LEMP underpins the School Model, providing the operational framework to apply its principles. It aligns with option appraisal processes, ensuring every investment or proposed change in the estate is rigorously evaluated against criteria including educational benefit, cost-effectiveness, community impact, sustainability, and alignment with the Council's wider Transformation Programme (Audit Scotland, 2008). This supports informed decisions on school reconfiguration, mothballing, consolidation, or capital investment, ensuring choices deliver maximum educational and community benefit while meeting statutory duties.

The LEMP applies five core investment standards, directly supporting the Transformation Programme's goals:

Compliance and Condition

Maintaining a safe, legally compliant learning estate through regular condition surveys, proactive maintenance, and timely upgrades to meet all building, fire, and health standards (Audit Scotland, 2008; Education Scotland, 2023). Ensuring buildings are structurally sound and compliant is a prerequisite for transformation and investment decisions.

Suitability

Investing in flexible, inclusive, and digitally enabled spaces to support modern curricula, enhance wellbeing, and future-proof the estate (OECD, 2019; Scottish Government, 2020). Suitability reviews will inform option appraisals under the School Model, ensuring retained assets can meet evolving learning needs.

10. Learning Estate Management Plan (LEMP) (cont'd)

Sufficiency

Ensuring schools are in the right locations and appropriately sized by analysing demographic trends and projected enrolments (National Records of Scotland, 2022; Scottish Government, 2024). This enables rationalisation where necessary, supporting the "fewer but better" principle while protecting access to high-quality education close to home.

Sustainability

Aligning investment decisions with net-zero ambitions and whole-life asset management principles (Scottish Government, 2021). This includes prioritising energy efficiency, low-carbon designs, and sustainable construction to deliver a climate-resilient learning estate.

Accessibility

Ensuring all learners, staff, and visitors can access facilities with dignity and ease, removing physical, sensory, and digital barriers to participation (Children and Young People's Commissioner Scotland, 2020; Scottish Government, 2021). Accessibility improvements will be prioritised in capital projects aligned with the School Model and Transformation Programme.

The LEMP enables delivery of the Council's Transformation Programme by:

- Using option appraisals to identify opportunities for rationalisation or investment, ensuring the school estate is efficient and sustainable.
- Aligning with the School Model to determine which assets to retain, enhance, consolidate, or re-purpose based on evidence and educational need.
- Prioritising capital investment where it will deliver the highest impact, including condition improvements, modernisation, and expansion of facilities to support early years and additional support needs.
- Supporting community wealth building and local regeneration by ensuring schools continue to serve as community hubs aligned with the Place Principle (Scottish Government & COSLA, 2019).

To operationalise the LEMP:

- Annual reviews will incorporate Core Facts, asset condition data, utilisation rates, and statutory compliance information (Scottish Government, 2019).
- Post-occupancy evaluations and lessons-learned reviews will inform future investments, ensuring continuous improvement.

10. Learning Estate Management Plan (LEMP) (cont'd)

- Stakeholder and community engagement will be embedded throughout, aligning investment with local needs and aspirations.
- A risk-based prioritisation matrix will ensure investment decisions are transparent, equitable, and aligned with the Transformation Programme.

Through the Learning Estate Management Plan, Dumfries and Galloway Council will deliver a fit-for-purpose, future-ready, and sustainable school estate, directly supporting the Transformation Programme's goals of fewer, better assets that maximise educational and community benefit (Scottish Government, 2019; Education Scotland, 2023). By aligning with the School Model and using rigorous option appraisals, the Council will ensure all investment contributes to delivering high-quality education while managing resources efficiently, addressing climate objectives, and supporting community wellbeing.

LEARNING ESTATE MANAGEMENT PLAN KEY POINTS

Operational Delivery Tool: The LEMP turns the Learning Estate Strategy into action through annual, data-driven planning and investment decisions.

Focus on Five Standards: All decisions are guided by compliance, suitability, sufficiency, sustainability, and accessibility.

Supports Transformation: It underpins the Council's goal of delivering "fewer but better" schools that are efficient, inclusive, and future-proofed.

Evidence-Based Decisions: Uses condition surveys, utilisation data, and community input to prioritise upgrades, consolidations, or new builds.

Transparent and Accountable: Annual updates ensure public visibility, continuous improvement, and alignment with wider Council strategies.

11. Asset Class

Property assets are an important contributory factor to the quality of public services (Audit Scotland, 2008; Scottish Futures Trust, 2020). Well-designed, well-maintained, and well-utilised buildings enable the delivery of effective services, promote community confidence, and can stimulate wider economic and social regeneration within communities (Scottish Government & COSLA, 2019 – Place Principle). For Dumfries and Galloway Council, property represents one of the largest areas of expenditure after staffing. It is therefore essential that these assets are managed efficiently and effectively to ensure best value for the public purse while delivering on educational outcomes (Scottish Government, 2019; Education Scotland, 2023).

The Council has committed to transformative change in how it will manage and sustain the Learning Estate, which represents the largest element of the Council's property assets and is geographically dispersed across a region characterised by rurality, small communities, and significant travel distances (National Records of Scotland, 2022; Scottish Parliament SPICe, 2020). This transformation is guided by the Learning Estate Strategy and Learning Estate Management Plan, which ensure that investment and management decisions are evidence-based, aligned with the School Model, and support the Transformation Programme's commitment to delivering fewer but better assets that are sustainable, inclusive, and future-proofed (Scottish Government, 2024).

All financial and staff resources deployed in managing the Learning Estate will be centrally monitored. This will cover all aspects of:

- Physical condition and statutory compliance (Scottish Government, 2023; Scottish Futures Trust, 2020),
- Suitability and adaptability to deliver modern curricula (OECD, 2020),
- Sufficiency and capacity aligned to demographic projections and utilisation targets (National Records of Scotland, 2022; Scottish Government, 2024),
- Accessibility and inclusivity for all learners and users (Children and Young People's Commissioner Scotland, 2020),
- Sustainability aligned to the Council's net-zero targets and climate resilience planning (Scottish Government, 2021).

This central monitoring approach will ensure consistency and transparency in prioritising resources and enable the Council to leverage economies of scale across its extensive Learning Estate portfolio (Audit Scotland, 2008). It will also allow for systematic data collection and analysis to inform option appraisals when considering reconfiguration, consolidation, mothballing, or investment decisions under the School Model, ensuring that the asset base remains fit-for-purpose and aligned with service delivery needs (Scottish Government, 2019; Education Scotland, 2023).

11. Asset Class (cont'd)

Crucially, property management decisions will not be made in isolation but will be integrated into place-based planning and community engagement approaches in line with the Place Principle and the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015 (Scottish Government & COSLA, 2019). This will ensure that property assets continue to serve as community anchors, supporting multi-functional uses where appropriate (e.g., adult learning, community groups, early learning and childcare) and enhancing the social value of Council assets beyond their core educational function (Bagley & Hargreaves, 2018).

Digital asset management tools and centralised performance dashboards will be utilised to monitor real-time data on building performance, utilisation rates, energy consumption, and maintenance needs, supporting transparent and evidence-led investment decisions (Scottish Futures Trust, 2020; Education Scotland, 2023). This aligns with the Council's commitment to digital transformation, ensuring efficient management practices while reducing administrative burdens on individual schools and services.

By embedding the management of the Learning Estate within the broader Asset Class framework, Dumfries and Galloway Council will ensure that every property decision contributes to creating safe, inclusive, sustainable, and inspiring learning environments while maximising public value, supporting community resilience, and aligning with the Council's vision for future-ready, high-quality education across all communities (Scottish Government, 2024; OECD, 2020; Audit Scotland, 2008).

ASSET CLASS KEY POINTS

Strategic Asset Management: The learning estate is the Council's largest property asset and must be managed efficiently to ensure best value and educational impact.

Central Monitoring: All financial and staffing resources related to school buildings are centrally tracked to support consistent, data-driven decisions.

Performance-Based Planning: Decisions are based on building condition, suitability, capacity, accessibility, and sustainability.

Community Integration: Schools are treated as community hubs, supporting wider services like adult learning, childcare, and local events.

Digital Tools for Oversight: Real-time dashboards and asset management systems help monitor energy use, maintenance needs, and utilisation across the estate.

12. Public-Private Partnership (PPP) Schools

The Council has a contractual agreement with e4d&g, a Special Purpose Vehicle (SPV), for the design, build, finance, and maintenance of ten schools across Dumfries and Galloway under a Public-Private Partnership (PPP) arrangement (Amey, 2008). This PPP project, known locally as the "Smarter Schools" initiative, aimed to modernise the school estate while ensuring high-quality, sustainable learning environments (Exquisitive Education, 2024).

In this model, e4d&g was responsible for securing the funding, managing the design and construction of the new schools, and ensuring ongoing facilities management to maintain these schools to a high standard throughout the contract term. The Council retains responsibility for educational provision within these schools, while the SPV ensures that the physical environment remains conducive to learning by maintaining the infrastructure, including building fabric, doors, windows, flooring, paintwork, and furniture. This proactive maintenance approach prevents deterioration over time, reducing the risk of poor learning environments impacting educational outcomes (Scottish Futures Trust, 2020; Education Scotland, 2023).

Under the current contract, the Council pays:

- £7.16 million annually, fixed over 30 years, plus
- £5.76 million annually, indexed to inflation.

In return, the Council receives support from the Scottish Government comprising:

- £7.381 million annually for each of the 27 full contract years, and
- £15.513 million in total during a 5-year run-in period.

These structured payments ensure financial predictability while leveraging Scottish Government support to manage the long-term affordability of the PPP scheme (Amey, 2008; Scottish Government, 2020).

Although PPP is often described as a "partnership," it is fundamentally a commercial relationship governed by contractual obligations (Exquisitive Education, 2024). e4d&g subcontracted the construction work to FMP, a joint venture comprising Farrans (Construction) Ltd, H&J Martin Limited, and Patton Construction, ensuring delivery by experienced industry partners (Amey, 2008). The facilities management (FM) aspect is delivered by Amey Built Environment (ABE), which is responsible for daily maintenance, repairs, and lifecycle replacements throughout the contract period. It is important to note that the Council's direct contractual relationship is with e4d&g, not with the subcontractors, ensuring clear lines of accountability for service delivery.

12. Public-Private Partnership (PPP) Schools (cont'd)

The following schools were delivered and are maintained under the PPP contract:

1. Moffat Academy
2. Lockerbie Academy
3. Lockerbie Primary School
4. Stranraer Academy
5. Wallace Hall Academy
6. Wallace Hall Primary School
7. Heathhall Primary School
8. Castle Douglas Primary School
9. Kirkcudbright Primary School
10. St Andrews RC Primary School

These schools collectively represent a significant portion of the Council's learning estate and play a vital role in delivering high-quality, modern educational environments across both rural and urban contexts within Dumfries and Galloway.

The PPP schools form a core part of the Council's Learning Estate Management Plan (LEMP) and contribute to the "fewer but better" assets commitment within the wider Transformation Programme (Scottish Government, 2024; Education Scotland, 2023). Their high-quality infrastructure aligns with the School Model by supporting flexible learning spaces, enhanced digital connectivity, and inclusive design while reducing the burden of reactive maintenance.

As these assets mature within the PPP framework, the Council will continue to monitor utilisation, condition, and educational impact through the LEMP to inform future planning. Lessons learned from the PPP model will also guide the development of future investment strategies, ensuring that Dumfries and Galloway continues to deliver sustainable, high-quality, and future-proofed learning environments (Scottish Futures Trust, 2020; Audit Scotland, 2008).

13. Strategic Projects

Dumfries and Galloway Council has successfully leveraged the Scottish Government's Learning Estate Investment Programme (LEIP), combined with local funding, to deliver a series of Strategic Projects that exemplify its commitment to delivering fewer, better, future-proofed assets aligned with the principles of the Learning Estate Strategy and the School Model.

The Dumfries Learning Town (DLT) Programme, delivered in two phases, represents one of the most ambitious educational infrastructure transformations in the region's history. The vision for DLT is to establish Dumfries as a "learning town," where education sustains communities, supports wellbeing, and underpins economic growth (Graham Construction, 2020; Morgan Sindall, 2024).

DLT Phase 1 delivered projects including the North West Community Campus, the redevelopment of St Joseph's College, and the creation of The Bridge, an innovative post-15 learning centre providing vocational pathways and senior-phase opportunities. These facilities were designed to meet the needs of the Curriculum for Excellence by providing flexible, technology-enabled spaces that support a broad and modern curriculum. The programme also ensured the rationalisation of the estate by consolidating multiple ageing facilities into modern, energy-efficient campuses, reducing the building footprint while increasing capacity and utilisation (Dumfries and Galloway Council, 2023).

DLT Phase 2 builds on this success with the planned replacement of Dumfries High School, enhancements to Noblehill and Laurieknowe Primary Schools, and a comprehensive option appraisal for Loreburn Primary and Dumfries Academy. This phase continues to align with the Council's commitment to ensuring that learners have access to high-quality education in environments that are sustainable and fit for the future, while maintaining clear alignment with the Place Principle and community engagement commitments outlined in the Learning Estate Strategy (Scottish Government & COSLA, 2019).

Through DLT, the Council is operationalising the School Model's principles by creating multi-age, all-through campuses, reducing reliance on fragmented facilities, and providing a coherent and adaptable infrastructure to support future learning needs while maintaining local access and community identity.

The Dalbeattie Learning Campus, opened in 2017, exemplifies the "fewer but better" approach, replacing separate nursery, primary, and secondary schools with a single, purpose-built campus. Delivered with £10 million of LEIP funding and designed with energy-efficient, passive design principles, the campus enhances sustainability while providing high-quality learning environments (Graham Construction, 2017).

13. Strategic Projects (cont'd)

Dalbeattie Learning Campus supports the School Model's focus on two-class primary provision within a shared campus, enhancing curriculum delivery while ensuring community connectivity and local accessibility. The design of the campus fosters collaboration and the integration of community facilities, reflecting the Council's broader ambition to use schools as community anchors, contributing to regeneration and place-based planning while achieving operational efficiencies (Scottish Government, 2023).

These strategic projects demonstrate how Dumfries and Galloway Council is aligning capital investment with the aims of the Learning Estate Strategy and Transformation Programme:

Fewer, Better Assets

By consolidating multiple ageing or underutilised facilities into modern campuses, the Council is reducing the overall estate footprint while improving utilisation rates and ensuring resources are directed where they can deliver the greatest educational impact (Audit Scotland, 2008; OECD, 2019).

Future-Proofed Learning Estate

Both DLT and Dalbeattie Learning Campus are designed with flexible spaces, integrated digital infrastructure, and sustainability measures that allow them to adapt to future curricular and demographic changes, aligning with the Council's sustainability commitments and climate targets (Scottish Government, 2021; Education Scotland, 2023).

Investment in Sustainable Schools

The projects prioritise energy efficiency, reduced carbon footprints, and sustainable construction practices, supporting the Council's net-zero targets and demonstrating leadership in climate-conscious capital investment (Scottish Futures Trust, 2020; Scottish Government, 2024).

> "Maintaining small schools can support rural sustainability, but this must be balanced with educational quality, cost-effectiveness and the realities of demographic change."
>
> Hargreaves et al, 2009

13. Strategic Projects (cont'd)

School Model Alignment

Multi-age, all-through campuses and efficient two-class models in rural areas align with the School Model's commitment to appropriate scaling, avoiding one-teacher schools, and ensuring high-quality learning experiences in every community (Scottish Government, 2010; Dumfries and Galloway Council, 2022).

Supporting Community Wellbeing and Place-Based Regeneration

These projects embody the Place Principle, positioning schools as vital community assets that support wider economic and social goals, including attracting and retaining families and contributing to local regeneration (Scottish Government & COSLA, 2019; Paterson et al., 2023).

Facilitating Option Appraisals and Long-Term Planning

Strategic projects are informed by robust option appraisal processes, aligning with the Council's commitment to transparency, community engagement, and evidence-based decision-making in managing the learning estate (Scottish Government, 2014; Education Scotland, 2023).

The Dumfries Learning Town and Dalbeattie Learning Campus projects illustrate the Council's proactive approach to delivering a high-quality, inclusive, and future-ready learning estate. These projects not only address immediate infrastructure needs but also lay the groundwork for a learning estate that is sustainable, adaptable, and aligned with the ambitions of the Council Plan and the Learning Estate Strategy. By connecting investment in the learning estate to educational, social, and environmental objectives, Dumfries and Galloway Council is ensuring that learners today and in the future benefit from environments that inspire, support, and sustain their development.

14. Schools As Community Assets

Schools are among the most significant community assets within Dumfries and Galloway, offering not only educational provision but also social, cultural, and economic value to their localities. The creation of Community Campuses and Learning Centres supports a 2–18 educational pathway, ensuring seamless transitions from Early Years through Broad General Education to Senior Phase, while positioning schools as accessible community hubs (Education Scotland, 2024; Scottish Government & COSLA, 2019 – Place Principle).

The Learning Estate Strategy (LES) prioritises the design and use of schools as multifunctional community spaces, in line with Education Scotland's Community Learning and Development (CLD) Framework (Education Scotland, 2023). This approach maximises public investment, reduces duplication of facilities, and encourages lifelong learning opportunities for all residents, supporting the National Performance Framework's aims for inclusive and empowered communities (Scottish Government, 2018).

> "Schools should be seen as an integral part of the fabric of their communities, with facilities that can be used for wider community benefit."
>
> Scotland's Learning Estate Strategy, 2019

Schools acting as community assets enable residents of all ages to access:

- Social and cultural opportunities, including evening classes, arts, and community gatherings.
- Health and wellbeing services, including sport and leisure facilities.
- Business and enterprise activities, using shared meeting spaces and digital hubs.
- Public services and democratic participation, through voting stations and community forums.

This aligns with Scottish Government guidance on Maximising the School Estate to support community resilience and economic regeneration, particularly in rural and fragile communities (Scottish Government, 2021).

Future school design under the LES and School Model will prioritise:

- Flexible, multipurpose spaces: adaptable rooms, movable partitions, and digital infrastructure to support learning, community meetings, and events outside the traditional school day.
- Agile and specialist suites: spaces for STEM, arts, community kitchens, and sports adaptable for curricular and community use.
- Sustainable infrastructure, supporting net-zero targets while ensuring year-round, community-friendly access.

14. Schools As Community Assets (cont'd)

- Digital connectivity and hybrid learning infrastructure to facilitate virtual community engagement, building on models developed during COVID-19 (Education Scotland, 2021; OECD, 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated the need for flexibility, showing the benefits of hybrid learning models and the use of school sites as community support hubs during emergencies (Education Scotland, 2021). Future estate planning will integrate these learnings to enhance resilience and adaptiveness within community settings.

The CLD Inspection of Dumfries and Galloway (Education Scotland, 2024) highlighted effective partnerships between schools, community organisations, and CLD services, particularly in:

- Supporting young people's mental health and employability.
- Reducing isolation in rural communities through local learning opportunities.
- Promoting digital inclusion.

By embedding CLD principles into the Learning Estate Management Plan, schools will continue to support:

- Intergenerational learning programmes, encouraging older adults to access community education.
- Family learning initiatives, supporting literacy and numeracy in partnership with early years and primary settings.
- Targeted community programmes aligned with local needs, co-designed with community councils and third-sector partners.

The Learning Estate Transformation Programme aligns investment in the school estate with community use, ensuring "fewer but better" assets that maximise utilisation and community benefit while reducing operational costs (Audit Scotland, 2008). This approach supports:

Local delivery of national policy on community empowerment (Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015).

The Council's Capital Investment Plan by reducing the need for multiple facilities serving the same community needs.

Long-term sustainability through reduced carbon footprint and efficient energy use in buildings used throughout the week.

Schools as community assets are central to Dumfries and Galloway's Learning Estate Strategy, supporting educational excellence, community resilience, and economic regeneration. By designing schools as inclusive, flexible, and multifunctional hubs, the Council will ensure every investment in the learning estate delivers value beyond the school day, supporting all ages in accessing learning, wellbeing, and community opportunities locally.

15. Early Learning Centres And Partnership Nurseries

Early Learning and Childcare (ELC) provision is central to Dumfries and Galloway's commitment to giving every child the best start in life, tackling inequalities, and supporting families and communities. The expansion and improvement of ELC is a cornerstone of the Council's Learning Estate Strategy, reflecting Scottish Government priorities set out in "A Blueprint for 2020: The Expansion of Early Learning and Childcare in Scotland" (Scottish Government, 2017) and the Quality Action Plan.

Barriers to learning can arise from a variety of factors, including learning difficulties, adverse childhood experiences, and physical or mental health challenges. The Council's School Estate Management Plan (SEMP) promotes flexible and responsive educational opportunities for all, ensuring that the needs of children are met through a range of flexible learning spaces across the wider school estate. This approach aligns with the Presumption to Provide Education in a Mainstream Setting (Scottish Government, 2019), ensuring inclusivity from the earliest stages of education.

The expansion to 1140 hours of funded ELC for all 3 and 4-year-olds, and eligible 2-year-olds, has been successfully implemented across Dumfries and Galloway, with provision delivered through a mix of local authority Early Learning Centres, Partner Providers, and Childminders. The Council's Early Learning and Childcare Expansion Implementation Plan mapped current assets, identified provision gaps, and directed refurbishments and new builds to ensure sustainable delivery of high-quality ELC (Scottish Government, 2017).

Partner Provider Nurseries (private and voluntary sector providers working under partnership agreements with the Council) play a vital role in expanding capacity and ensuring local access to funded ELC, particularly in rural communities where maintaining local authority-run centres may not be feasible.

> "High-quality early learning and childcare is key to giving children the best start in life."
>
> Education Scotland, 2023

These partnerships:

- Enhance parental choice and flexibility in accessing ELC locally.
- Support community sustainability by retaining young families in rural areas.
- Complement the Council's School Model by ensuring ELC provision is embedded within localities, supporting transitions into primary education.
- Enable continued ELC access when school mothballing decisions are necessary due to low pupil rolls, by retaining early years provision locally even where primary provision is temporarily suspended.

(cont'd)

15. Early Learning Centres And Partnership Nurseries

In practice, partner providers are quality assured by the Care Inspectorate and Education Scotland and work collaboratively with the Council to deliver the Realising the Ambition pedagogy and the principles of learning through play and outdoor learning (Education Scotland, 2020).

The Council's School Model informs the planning and provision of ELC spaces by ensuring that early years settings are integrated into sustainable primary models, particularly two-class configurations, supporting smooth transitions for children and operational efficiencies (Dumfries and Galloway Council, 2022). In rural areas where mothballing of primary schools is under consideration due to low enrolment, ELC provision is reviewed to assess the feasibility of maintaining standalone nursery classes or partnership arrangements to preserve local access to early education, mitigating the impact of primary closures on young families and supporting rural resilience (Scottish Government, 2014; Dumfries and Galloway Council, 2025).

Dumfries and Galloway's ELC provision is also advancing Learning for Sustainability by embedding outdoor learning within its early years pedagogy. Schools and Early Childhood Centres are actively developing their grounds to facilitate outdoor play and learning, daily contact with nature, and environmental education, consistent with the Council's climate commitments and sustainability objectives (Scottish Government, 2021). Adaptation of existing properties and

15. Early Learning Centres And Partnership Nurseries

the design of new early years spaces prioritise natural light, ventilation, and outdoor access, ensuring environments are nurturing, healthy, and conducive to high-quality early learning experiences (Education Scotland, 2023).

Under the Learning Estate Management Plan, capital investment priorities for ELC include:

- Refurbishment of existing spaces to meet Care Inspectorate standards and increase capacity.
- Co-location of ELC within primary campuses, aligning with the School Model for operational efficiency.
- Investment in outdoor learning infrastructure.
- Collaboration with partner providers to expand high-quality provision where new builds are not viable.

Early Learning Centres and Partner Provider Nurseries are key enablers in delivering the Council's Learning Estate Strategy objectives, ensuring high-quality, accessible, and sustainable early years education. By aligning ELC provision with the School Model, supporting rural communities through partnership arrangements, and embedding outdoor learning and sustainability, Dumfries and Galloway is ensuring that every child, regardless of location, has the opportunity to thrive from the earliest stages of their educational journey.

EARLY LEARNING CENTRES AND PARTNERSHIP NURSERIES KEY POINTS

Best Start in Life: Early Learning and Childcare (ELC) is central to tackling inequality and supporting child development from the earliest years.

Flexible, Inclusive Provision: ELC is delivered through a mix of Council-run centres, partner providers, and childminders, ensuring local access and parental choice.

Support for Rural Communities: Partner nurseries help maintain early years provision in rural areas, even when primary schools are mothballed.

Outdoor and Sustainable Learning: ELC settings promote outdoor play, nature-based learning, and sustainability in line with climate goals.

Strategic Investment: Capital priorities include refurbishments, co-location with primary schools, and expanding capacity through partnerships.

16. Population And Demographics

Dumfries and Galloway continues to experience significant population change, with sustained declines in the 0–15 age group, regional outmigration, and an ageing population profile (National Records of Scotland, 2022; IFS, 2024). Between 2018 and 2028, the number of children aged 0–15 in Dumfries and Galloway is projected to fall by approximately 14%, with a further decline of over 23% by 2043 (NRS, 2022). This demographic shift poses direct challenges for school sustainability, rural viability, and local service provision (Scottish Parliament SPICe, 2020).

The Rural Schools Strategy highlights that falling pupil rolls, if unmanaged, can lead to educational fragility, increased costs per pupil, and negative impacts on children's social and learning experiences (Fargas-Malet & Bagley, 2023; Paterson et al., 2023). Smaller peer groups, difficulties in maintaining broad curricula, and professional isolation for staff in very small schools are all exacerbated by depopulation trends (OECD, 2019; Wilson et al., 2006).

> "Scotland's population is projected to start declining in 2028, with the number of children and working age people falling while the number of people of pensionable age increases, presenting challenges for service provision and community sustainability."
>
> National Records of Scotland, 2023

Recognising these challenges, the Council secured funding in 2024 from the Scottish Government's Addressing Depopulation Fund and Action Plan (Scottish Government, 2024) to support research into the drivers of these demographic changes and to explore place-based solutions. This research aligns with the Council's Place-Based Investment Strategy, Local Housing Strategy, and the Learning Estate Strategy, ensuring that decisions across housing, education, and community development are informed by robust data and local insight.

Four interlinked research themes are currently underway:

1. Housing and Population Trends

Aligned with the Local Housing Strategy and Housing Needs and Demand Assessment, this research is exploring how housing availability, affordability, and second-home ownership impact family decisions to remain in or move to Dumfries and Galloway. The shortage of affordable, family-sized homes in some rural areas contributes to outmigration and limits opportunities to stabilise school rolls (Scottish Government, 2023; NRS, 2022).

16. Population And Demographics (cont'd)

2. Community Engagement

In partnership with UWS and CoDeL, targeted engagement in the Glenkens, Rhins, and Newton Stewart areas is gathering community insight on local assets, service gaps, and priorities for resilience. Early findings indicate the importance of local schools as community anchors and the need for high-quality education to attract and retain families (Education Scotland, 2023; Fargas-Malet & Bagley, 2023).

3. Best Interventions

Building on the Glenkens pilot, CoDeL is reviewing successful local development models and identifying interventions with the greatest return on investment for stabilising and growing communities. This includes strategies around school sustainability, rural repopulation, and youth retention (Scottish Government, 2024).

4. Encouraging Migration In

A targeted "digital nomad" pilot is underway to attract new residents to Dumfries and Galloway's more fragile communities, learning from successful place-based campaigns such as Uist Beò. Access to high-quality, digitally enabled schools is a key factor in attracting remote workers with families, making the modernisation of the learning estate an integral part of wider economic development (Scottish Government, 2024; OECD, 2020).

This programme of work is directly aligned with Scotland's Changing Population (NRS, 2021) and the Scottish Government's Supporting and Enabling Sustainable Communities: Action Plan to Address Depopulation (2024). Its findings will inform local decision-making across housing, infrastructure, education, and digital policy, ensuring a coherent approach to community sustainability.

The Learning Estate Strategy (LES) plays a central role in responding to demographic change:

- *Future-Proofing Schools:* Ensuring schools are appropriately sized and configured to reflect projected rolls while maintaining quality and breadth of learning (Scottish Government, 2019).
- *School Model and Mothballing Policy:* These tools enable the Council to adapt flexibly to falling rolls while protecting learners' outcomes, ensuring that children do not face the disadvantages associated with isolated, unsustainable school settings (Dumfries and Galloway Council, 2025).
- *Equity and Access:* By investing in "fewer but better" schools aligned with demand, the LES ensures that even as populations decline, learners continue to have equitable access to high-quality, digitally enabled, and inclusive education (Education Scotland, 2023; OECD, 2020).

16. Population And Demographics (cont'd)

- *Community Resilience:* Schools contribute to community identity and stability, and their sustainable operation supports wider efforts to retain and attract families, complementing initiatives under the Depopulation Action Plan and Place Principle (Scottish Government & COSLA, 2019).

The demographic challenges facing Dumfries and Galloway necessitate a strategic, evidence-based approach to managing the learning estate. By aligning investment and planning with demographic realities, the Learning Estate Strategy, Rural Schools Strategy, and School Model ensure that learners receive the best possible outcomes while supporting community sustainability across the region. This proactive approach transforms the challenge of depopulation into an opportunity to modernise and strengthen the learning estate for current and future generations.

POPULATION AND DEMOGRAPHICS KEY POINTS

Significant Decline in Young Population: The number of children aged 0–15 in Dumfries and Galloway is projected to fall by over 23% by 2043.

Rural Depopulation Pressures: Outmigration, declining birth rates, and an ageing population are reducing school rolls, especially in rural areas.

Impact on School Viability: Falling enrolments increase per-pupil costs and can lead to educational fragility and reduced curriculum breadth.

Alignment with National Policy: The strategy supports the Scottish Government's Action Plan to Address Depopulation and aims to sustain communities through high-quality education.

Strategic Research: The Council is conducting research into housing, migration, and community needs to inform place-based solutions.

17. School Mothballing

Dumfries and Galloway Council recognises that, in some cases, very low pupil rolls or operational challenges may impact the ability to deliver high-quality learning experiences in a specific setting. In such circumstances, temporary mothballing of an Early Learning and Childcare (ELC) setting, a primary school, or a stage of secondary education may be considered as a last resort.

Mothballing is distinct from permanent closure. It is a temporary, precautionary measure, guided by Scottish Government statutory guidance (Scottish Government, 2015), used when a setting is currently non-viable but may reopen if circumstances change (e.g., roll recovery due to housing growth). It supports the Council's duty to provide equity, sustainability, and high-quality education, in line with the School Model, Rural Schools Strategy, and LES priorities.

> "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."
>
> Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010 Statutory Guidance

Mothballing may be considered when:

- Primary school rolls fall below 10 pupils, or are projected to do so.
- Curriculum for Excellence entitlements and socialisation opportunities cannot be delivered effectively.
- The community indicates challenges in sustaining the school in the short term.

This ensures evidence-based, fair, and consistent decisions, reflecting SNCT and Care Inspectorate standards, while recognising the impact on children's rights (UNCRC Articles 3, 12, 28, 29).

Community involvement is central to the process. Before any decision:

- Officers engage with the Headteacher, Parent Council, staff, and Ward Members.
- Parents, carers, and the wider community are informed and invited to share views.
- School communities are kept updated throughout, with clear information on rights and potential next steps.
- Reports summarising community feedback and data analysis are presented to Elected Members for decision-making.

17. School Mothballing (cont'd)

This approach ensures transparency, partnership, and local voice in decisions that affect rural and local communities.

If a decision to mothball is made:

- Pupils are supported to transfer to alternative schools, with appropriate transport provided.
- Buildings are maintained in a safe, wind and watertight condition to allow reopening if demand returns.
- Annual enrolment and transfer opportunities remain available for families wishing to return.
- The status of mothballed schools is reviewed annually and reported to Committee.

The Council's mothballing procedures align with:

- The Education (Scotland) Act 1980 and Standards in Scotland's Schools Act 2000
- Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010 and statutory guidance (Scottish Government, 2015)
- The UNCRC, ensuring children's rights to education and participation are respected
- The Scottish Government's Depopulation Action Plan (2024), ensuring decisions are made with rural sustainability in mind.

While the Member and Officer Working Group (MOWG) has developed procedures for a refreshed Mothballing Policy, consultation on a new policy is currently paused. In the interim, these clear, community-centred procedures will guide the Council's approach, ensuring that temporary mothballing decisions protect educational quality, respect community voice, and align with wider Learning Estate Strategy goals.

18. School Transport

Access to education is a key principle within Dumfries and Galloway's Learning Estate Strategy, with safe, reliable, and sustainable transport provision essential to maintaining equitable access to high-quality learning opportunities across a geographically dispersed region.

Transport considerations directly influence school sustainability, pupil wellbeing, and family confidence in the school estate. Research highlights that excessive travel times can impact pupils' energy levels, participation in extracurricular activities, and overall educational experience (OECD, 2019; Paterson et al., 2023). The Council remains committed to ensuring that school transport is not a barrier to learning for children and young people in rural and urban areas alike.

The Council's School Transport Policy (2023) underpins this commitment, ensuring that eligible pupils are provided with safe, free transport to their catchment school, with the aim of maintaining journey times within reasonable limits wherever possible. Consistent with the Dumfries and Galloway School Model Principles, we will continue to seek to ensure that primary pupils are not required to travel for more than 30 minutes one way from their nearest classified road pick-up point, supporting the delivery of education close to home wherever feasible.

As we progress the Learning Estate Strategy, transport assessments will form an integral part of option appraisals for any proposed changes to the school estate. Impact on travel distances and times will be explicitly considered in alignment with the Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010, ensuring that any changes do not place undue hardship on learners or families. Early and transparent engagement with communities will remain central to planning any transport changes linked to the Learning Estate Strategy.

In alignment with the Council's climate and sustainability commitments, transport planning within the Learning Estate will also consider environmental impacts, working towards reducing carbon emissions associated with school travel. We will continue to explore options to support active travel (walking and cycling) where safe and practical, and to encourage modal shift where appropriate, while maintaining our commitment to safety and reliability.

18. School Transport (cont'd)

> "Good transport links are crucial in ensuring that all children and young people, regardless of where they live, can access the education they need and deserve."
>
> Scottish Government, 2020

By embedding transport considerations within the Learning Estate Strategy, Dumfries and Galloway Council seeks to ensure that geography does not limit educational opportunity, and that our learners can access a broad, high-quality curriculum while supporting community sustainability across the region.

SCHOOL TRANSPORT KEY POINTS

Equitable Access to Education: Safe, reliable, and sustainable school transport is essential to ensuring all pupils, regardless of location, can access high-quality education across the region.

Impact on Wellbeing and Participation: Long travel times negatively affect student wellbeing, energy levels, and involvement in extracurricular activities, making efficient transport a priority.

Policy Commitment: The 2023 School Transport Policy guarantees free, safe transport for eligible pupils, aiming to keep primary school journeys under 30 minutes from designated pick-up points.

Sustainability Goals: The strategy supports environmental objectives by promoting active travel and reducing carbon emissions, while maintaining safety and reliability in school transport.

19. Delivering The Strategy

The Dumfries and Galloway Learning Estate Strategy will be delivered through a structured, transparent, and evidence-based approach that aligns local ambitions with national policy while ensuring that the school estate actively supports educational excellence, community wellbeing, and sustainability across the region. Delivery of this strategy is integrated within Dumfries and Galloway Council's Strategic Transformation Programme, ensuring alignment with budget efficiency, future-proofing, and the principles established through public consultation on the Dumfries and Galloway School Model.

Strategic Governance and Alignment

The delivery of the Learning Estate Strategy sits within the Council's Transformation Programme, ensuring that investment in the learning estate aligns with the Council's wider ambitions for sustainable communities, service reform, and net zero (Dumfries and Galloway Council Plan 2023–2028). The Strategy operationalises the Council's commitment to delivering high-quality, inclusive, and flexible learning environments, aligning with the Scottish Government's Learning Estate Strategy (2019), which emphasises the need for an estate that supports excellence and equity while being sustainable and efficient.

The Strategy is delivered through the Learning Estate Management Plan (LEMP), which sets out the annual monitoring, prioritisation, and reporting processes for all learning estate investment decisions, including condition, suitability, sufficiency, sustainability, and accessibility (Scottish Government, 2019; Audit Scotland, 2008). By publishing an annual LEMP update, the Council will ensure decisions are transparent, data-informed, and strategically aligned.

> "We will continue to transform how we deliver services to meet the needs of our communities, making best use of our resources to achieve the best outcomes for the people of Dumfries and Galloway."
>
> Dumfres and Galloway Council Plan, 2023

Community Engagement and Empowerment

Community involvement is central to the delivery of the Strategy, recognising the vital role schools play as community anchors (Fargas-Malet & Bagley, 2023; Scottish Government & COSLA, 2019 – Place Principle). Building on the School Model public consultation, which identified community priorities and optimal models of provision, the

19. Delivering The Strategy (cont'd)

Council will continue to engage learners, parents, staff, and wider stakeholders in shaping local decisions, reflecting the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015.

Formal consultation processes under the Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010 will be used where statutory changes are proposed, with early engagement prioritised to build trust and ensure decisions reflect the aspirations of local communities. The updated Mothballing Procedures will support local flexibility, providing communities with clarity on when and why temporary closures may be necessary to protect educational outcomes, while preserving the potential for re-opening if local circumstances change (Scottish Government, 2015).

School Model and Option Appraisals

The Strategy is underpinned by the Dumfries and Galloway School Model, which sets clear principles for the planning and configuration of schools, focusing on "fewer but better" assets that support flexible, high-quality education while maintaining community viability. The School Model, shaped by extensive public consultation, defines thresholds for review, the importance of two-class viability in rural settings, and the strategic avoidance of one-teacher schools except in exceptional circumstances, ensuring educational quality and social interaction for learners (Bagley & Hargreaves, 2018; OECD, 2019).

Option appraisals will be conducted systematically, using Scottish Futures Trust and Education Scotland guidance, to evaluate investment decisions across the estate, prioritising those which support educational outcomes, community value, and sustainability.

Capital Investment and Strategic Projects

Delivery will build on the Council's proven track record in managing large-scale strategic projects, including the Dalbeattie Learning Campus, Dumfries Learning Town (Phases 1 and 2), and the new Dumfries High School, aligning with Learning Estate Investment Programme (LEIP) funding opportunities (Morgan Sindall, 2023; Graham Construction, 2022). These projects demonstrate how modern, digitally enabled, and flexible learning environments can transform education, support effective curriculum delivery, and act as hubs for community activity.

Future projects will align with Scotland's net zero targets, focusing on low-carbon construction, energy efficiency, and whole-life sustainability while ensuring that spaces support blended learning, outdoor education, and community use (Scottish Government, 2021; Education Scotland, 2023).

19. Delivering The Strategy (cont'd)

Digital Transformation and Sustainability

Digital innovation is a key enabler in delivering the Strategy, ensuring learners across Dumfries and Galloway can access high-quality, flexible education regardless of location (OECD, 2020). The Council will leverage Glow, e-Sgoil, and DGConnect, alongside investments in digital infrastructure, to support curriculum delivery, staff collaboration, and equitable access to learning.

Environmental sustainability is integrated into all delivery plans, with the Council prioritising investment that contributes to net zero targets, supports climate resilience, and reduces long-term operating costs (Scottish Futures Trust, 2020; Scottish Government, 2021).

Monitoring, Reporting, and Continuous Improvement

Progress on delivering the Strategy will be monitored and reported annually to the Education, Skills, and Community Wellbeing Committee through the Learning Estate Management Plan, with data on condition, capacity, utilisation, and community engagement outcomes ensuring accountability and enabling agile responses to emerging challenges.

The Council will continue to engage with national partners, including Education Scotland, Scottish Futures Trust, and COSLA, to share good practice, secure funding opportunities, and contribute to Scotland-wide learning estate development goals.

By taking this structured, community-informed, and data-led approach, Dumfries and Galloway will ensure that every learner, regardless of postcode, has access to a safe, sustainable, and inspiring learning environment, supporting their aspirations while strengthening the social and economic fabric of the region.

20. Conclusion

The Dumfries and Galloway Learning Estate Strategy sets out a clear, evidence-led pathway to future-proofing our learning environments, ensuring they remain sustainable, inclusive, and resilient in the face of demographic change and financial pressures while protecting and enhancing outcomes for learners.

Our region faces significant challenges. Declining school-age populations, shifting community demographics, and ageing buildings require a bold, forward-looking approach. As highlighted by the National Records of Scotland (2022), the number of children aged 0–15 in Dumfries and Galloway is projected to fall by 14% by 2028, with further declines expected beyond this horizon. This reality necessitates a shift towards "fewer but better assets" that support learners while ensuring financial and environmental sustainability and security.

Aligned with the Scottish Government's Learning Estate Strategy (2019) commitment to "an estate that supports excellence and equity for all, is well-managed, and sustainable," our strategy prioritises delivering modern, adaptable, and digitally enabled learning spaces that can flex with community needs and new curriculum demands. As the national strategy states, "Learning environments should be safe, secure, and fit for purpose, with children at the centre of decision-making," a principle that is woven throughout this document and our delivery approach.

Our School Model Principles, developed through extensive and wide-reaching public consultation, guide how we will reshape our learning estate to secure the best educational and social outcomes, particularly in rural and fragile communities. These principles, grounded in research and community voice, ensure we avoid one-teacher schools except in exceptional circumstances, support viable two-class provision in our most rural areas, and use strategic mothballing with clear thresholds and transparent community engagement. As noted by the OECD (2019), "Schools are at the heart of rural communities, and decisions about them should reflect the role they play in sustaining local identity, cohesion, and viability."

We recognise that schools are more than buildings; they are hubs of community activity, wellbeing, and resilience (Fargas-Malet & Bagley, 2023; Scottish Government & COSLA, 2019 – Place Principle). Our commitment to designing future schools as community assets ensures that investments in the learning estate support wider aspirations for local regeneration, inclusion, and sustainability.

> "Schools are more than buildings; they are at the heart of communities and key to their sustainability."
>
> Scotland's Learning Estate Strategy 2019

20. Conclusion (cont'd)

This strategy also aligns with the Council's Transformation Programme and Capital Investment Strategy, ensuring that every pound spent is targeted towards achieving maximum benefit for learners while maintaining best value for the public purse. Strategic projects such as Dumfries Learning Town Phases 1 and 2, the new Dumfries High School, and Dalbeattie Learning Campus showcase our commitment to delivering transformational learning environments while leveraging national funding opportunities through the Learning Estate Investment Programme.

Sustainability and climate resilience are at the heart of this Strategy. As the Scottish Government's Net Zero Public Sector Buildings Standard (2021) notes, "Public sector buildings must lead by example in reducing emissions, improving energy efficiency, and supporting a just transition to net zero." The Council will prioritise low-carbon design, renewable energy integration, and sustainable construction in all future projects to ensure the learning estate contributes positively to climate goals while reducing operational costs.

Digital innovation, recognised as a key enabler in the OECD's "21st Century Learning Environments", is embedded within the Strategy, ensuring our learning spaces support blended learning, digital skills development, and connectivity for learners and staff across Dumfries and Galloway, reducing geographic barriers to opportunity.

Above all, the Strategy places learners at its centre. Every decision, from large-scale capital investment to smaller,

20. Conclusion (cont'd)

localised changes, will be assessed against the principles of equity, excellence, and sustainability to ensure that all children and young people, regardless of postcode, have access to high-quality learning environments that nurture their development, wellbeing, and aspirations.

As Scotland's Learning Estate Strategy reminds us, "the learning estate must be dynamic, evolving to meet the needs of learners, communities and the planet." Dumfries and Galloway's Learning Estate Strategy answers this call, providing a clear, pragmatic, and ambitious plan to secure the future of education in our region while empowering communities and contributing to a thriving, sustainable Dumfries and Galloway.

The sustainability of the learning estate is not only a matter of buildings but of community viability. As highlighted by the National Records of Scotland (2023), with projected declines in the 0-15 population, future-proofing educational provision is essential to retaining and attracting families to our region. This strategy ensures that 'learning environments support excellence and equity for all' while safeguarding financial sustainability (Scottish Government, 2019).

Through this Strategy, we are not only managing buildings; we are investing in the future of our children and communities, ensuring that the learning estate continues to support educational excellence, community wellbeing, and local resilience for generations to come.

CONCLUSION KEY POINTS

Urgent Need for Change: Declining pupil numbers, ageing buildings, and financial pressures require a bold, long-term approach to managing the school estate.

Fewer but Better Assets: The strategy prioritises modern, sustainable, and inclusive learning environments that are adaptable to future needs.

Learner-Centred Planning: All decisions are guided by equity, excellence, and the wellbeing of children and young people.

Community Focus: Schools are positioned as community hubs and designed to meet net-zero and climate resilience goals.

Strategic Alignment: The strategy supports national policy, local transformation plans, and ensures every investment delivers maximum educational and community benefit.

22. Glossary Of Terms

Term / Acronym	Definition
ASN	Additional Support Needs – educational support required by children and young people who need extra help to benefit from school education.
CLD	Community Learning and Development – a framework supporting lifelong learning, personal development, and active citizenship.
COSLA	Convention of Scottish Local Authorities – the national association of Scottish councils.
CfE	Curriculum for Excellence - Scotland's national curriculum framework for learners aged 3 to 18.
DLT	Dumfries Learning Town – a strategic programme to modernise and consolidate education facilities in Dumfries.
ELC	Early Learning and Childcare – education and care for children before they begin primary school.
GIRFEC	Getting It Right for Every Child – Scotland's national approach to improving outcomes and supporting the wellbeing of children and young people.
IFS	Institute for Fiscal Studies – an independent economics research institute.
LEIP	Learning Estate Investment Programme – Scottish Government funding programme for school infrastructure.

22. Glossary Of Terms (cont'd)

LEMP	Learning Estate Management Plan – the operational plan that implements the Learning Estate Strategy.
LES	Learning Estate Strategy – the overarching strategy for managing and developing the school estate.
MOWG	Member and Officer Working Group – a council group that develops and reviews policy proposals.
NPF4	National Planning Framework 4 – Scotland's long-term spatial strategy for infrastructure and development.
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development – an international organisation that provides policy advice and research.
PPP	Public-Private Partnership – a funding model where private companies finance, build, and maintain public infrastructure.
SEMP	School Estate Management Plan – a plan that outlines how school buildings are maintained and improved.
SPICe	Scottish Parliament Information Centre – provides impartial research and information to the Scottish Parliament.
SFT	Scottish Futures Trust – a government-backed organisation that supports infrastructure investment.
UNCRC	United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child – an international treaty that sets out children's rights.

Photo: Dumfries High School