Dumfries and Galloway COUNCIL

Dumfries and Galloway Rural School Estate Strategy

2026–2031

1. Strategic Context

Rural schools are vital community assets in Dumfries and Galloway, providing not only education but also social cohesion, identity, and resilience. In many rural areas, the school is widely regarded as 'the heart of the community' and often serves as the only public facility or anchor institution supporting children, families, and intergenerational activity (Fargas-Malet & Bagley, 2023). This role is particularly significant in dispersed and ageing populations where access to public services is limited (SPICe, 2022).

Across the UK and Europe, rural areas are experiencing significant demographic shifts. Falling birth rates and youth outmigration are placing growing pressure on the sustainability of local services - particularly education. In one Welsh local authority, declining school rolls have driven a projected overspend of £11 million in 2025–26, with nearly half of all schools running at a deficit. Their Council leaders have described school rationalisation as their "biggest single threat" to financial stability (Nation Cymru, 2025). Scotland faces similar demographic challenges. The national fertility rate has fallen to a record low of 1.30 children per woman, well below the replacement level of 2.1 required to sustain population levels (National Records of Scotland, 2023). Schools across the UK are projected to lose hundreds of thousands of pupils by 2030. School running costs do not decline in line with pupil numbers, creating mounting financial pressure and making sustainable, evidence-based planning more urgent than ever.

> "The Rural School Strategy 2026-2031 addresses the unique challenges of delivering education in remote areas, promoting equity and sustainability."
>
> Dumfries and Galloway Learning Estate Strategy 2026-2031

Scottish communities have long observed that their small schools can deliver high-quality education and contribute positively to pupil attainment, wellbeing, and long-term outcomes (Paterson, 2023). Small rural schools offer a distinctive learning environment where individual attention, community-based learning, and cross-age collaboration can enhance engagement and social development (Fargas-Malet & Bagley, 2023; Kalaoja & Pietarinen, 2009).

The Council recognises both the educational and social value of rural schools and is committed to supporting them wherever it is reasonable and feasible to do so. This position is consistent with the Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010, which places additional responsibilities on local authorities to consider the impact of school changes on rural communities and to demonstrate viable alternatives to closure. While difficult decisions may at times be required, this strategy is not purely driven by rationalisation but by long-term sustainability and pupil outcomes.

The Council recognises that some communities are concerned that the closure of a rural school may contribute

1. Strategic Context (cont'd)

to wider population decline, affecting family retention, local services, and the long-term sustainability of rural settlements. While a number of studies suggest a possible link between school closures and community fragility (Slee & Miller, 2015), wider research remains mixed, with some research noting that closures often reflect - rather than cause - underlying demographic and economic challenges (OECD, 2019; IFS, 2025). The Council will continue to assess these complex interdependencies as part of any future options appraisal, ensuring that decisions are based on a broad and balanced consideration of educational, social, and demographic evidence.

A lack of resources or declining enrolment should not therefore, in isolation, be viewed as justification for school closure. Indeed, research increasingly calls for a shift away from deficit narratives and towards recognition of the 'rural advantage' - the unique strengths and potentials of small rural schools (Fargas-Malet & Bagley, 2023; Hargreaves et al., 2009). These include stronger relationships between staff and families, integration with the local environment, and enhanced opportunities for pupil voice and responsibility.

To realise this potential, small schools must be adequately supported with well-qualified staff, access to a broad curriculum, high-quality facilities, and professional development tailored to multi-age and flexible teaching models (Hargreaves et al., 2009; Kalaoja & Pietarinen, 2009). However, there must be an acceptance that a school can be 'too small', to the detriment of pupil outcomes, and that 'best value' is not a taboo term to be dismissed in order to justify unreasonable and unfeasible school settings. Future investment must be weighed against pupil demand and the goal of improving outcomes for all (Local Government in Scotland Act 2003).

2. Rationale

Small rural schools can foster closely knit 'communities of learning' that are deeply embedded in place, where students are known, supported, and encouraged to reach their full potential (Hargreaves, 2009). These schools also strengthen community identity and social capital, serving as key drivers for sustainable rural development (Scottish Government & COSLA, 2019 – Place Principle; OECD, 2019).

At the same time, the Council must address significant and complex challenges facing rural schools. Many rural communities in Scotland are experiencing population decline, a trend that is projected to accelerate over the coming decades. Fourteen local authorities- mainly in the West of Scotland - are forecast to see population decreases, with a disproportionate impact on rural and island communities (National Records of Scotland; SPICe, 2022).

Dumfries and Galloway's own youth population is forecast to shrink significantly: the number of children aged 0-15 is projected to fall by approximately 14% between 2018 and 2028, and by over 23% by 2043 (National Records of Scotland). This presents a direct challenge to the sustainability of many rural schools, where falling rolls can affect both educational viability and financial efficiency as well as parent confidence in the future of their local school. Where a school roll falls to critically low levels with no evidence that pupil numbers will increase, parents and carers are faced with prolonged periods of uncertainty where schools are temporarily closed as a reactive measure to protect the education of children and young people.

The causes of rural depopulation are multifaceted and there is no quick fix to our regional challenges. A lack of affordable housing, limited public transport, digital connectivity gaps, and fewer local employment opportunities all contribute to outmigration and deter families from settling in rural areas (Scottish Government, 2024; Fargas-Malet & Bagley, 2023). Access to essential services - including education and healthcare - is also a critical factor in family decision-making about where to live (SPICe, 2022; IPPR, 2024).

Crucially, the presence of a local school often influences whether young families remain in, return to, or choose to move to a rural community. As noted by researchers, the closure of a rural school can be one of the most destabilising events for a village, leading to community fragmentation, loss of identity, and reduced intergenerational ties (Fargas-Malet & Bagley, 2023; Budge, 2006). Such closures frequently accelerate an 'inevitable' cycle of ageing population and further depopulation, particularly when alternative services are not provided nearby (Hargreaves et al., 2009; Scottish Government, 2024). It is also important to note that this impact is not uniformly experienced across all communities. In Dumfries and Galloway, there have been instances where the closure of small rural schools has had minimal or no

2. Rationale (cont'd)

adverse effect on the local community - particularly where population levels have remained stable and pupils have benefited from attending larger, alternative schools within a reasonable commuting distance.

Conversely, maintaining local schools can act as a cornerstone of rural regeneration. A well-supported school signals that a community is active, viable, and 'has a future,' helping to attract new families and retain existing ones (Kalaoja & Pietarinen, 2009; Scottish Government & COSLA, 2019 – Place Principle). This is reflected in the Scottish Government's policy framework, which includes a presumption against the closure of rural schools under the Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010 - requiring education authorities to demonstrate that all alternatives have been properly considered in relation to the likely effect on the local community.

The Scottish Government's 2024 Supporting and Enabling Sustainable Communities action plan explicitly identifies the role of local schools in stabilising and revitalising rural populations. It states that schools must be seen as core infrastructure, particularly in fragile communities, and should be considered integral to any local development or housing strategy (Scottish Government, 2024).

While small rural schools can offer high-quality, community-rooted education, there are limits to what can be delivered when pupil numbers fall below a sustainable threshold. Extremely small rolls may constrain curriculum breadth, limit peer interaction, and place significant demands on staff working in isolated or wide-ranging, multi-stage settings (Sigsworth & Solstad, 2005; Kalaoja & Pietarinen, 2009). Evidence shows that having more peers is often important for pupil wellbeing, collaborative learning, and developmental progress (Hargreaves et al., 2009). The Council emphasises that viability is not only a financial question but also an educational and developmental one. This strategy seeks to protect rural provision wherever feasible, but also to ensure that all learners - regardless of location - have access to a broad, balanced curriculum and a positive school experience.

Dumfries and Galloway Council fully aligns with the national direction. We will support rural schools – and the communities they serve – wherever it is reasonable and sustainable to do so, balancing the needs of learners, including ensuring children are within a commutable distance to school, with the efficient use of public resources and the Council's strategic duty to plan for long-term community resilience.

3. Policy Alignment and Strategic Commitment

This Rural Schools Strategy is firmly grounded in national policy frameworks that guide and legitimise local decision-making. Dumfries and Galloway Council's approach reflects Scotland's Place Principle, jointly adopted by the Scottish Government and COSLA in 2019, which promotes a more joined-up, collaborative, and community-led approach to the planning and use of local services and assets (Scottish Government & COSLA, 2019). The Place Principle recognises that the physical, social, and economic fabric of 'place' is strengthened when public services - including education - are designed around the unique needs and identities of local communities.

In practical terms, this means recognising schools as central and enduring parts of 'place.' Decisions around the learning estate, particularly in rural areas, must therefore take account of the broader impacts on community identity, cohesion, and viability. The Scottish Government has made clear that when the school estate is treated as a strategic asset - aligned with housing, transport, and economic development - the outcomes for communities are significantly improved (Scottish Government, 2023; Scottish Government, 2024).

In parallel, this strategy aligns with the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015, which aims to empower local communities by giving them more say in how public services are planned and delivered. Specifically, the Act requires public authorities to engage meaningfully with communities in decisions that affect them. Consistent with this, Dumfries and Galloway Council will ensure that families and stakeholders are consulted as early as possible when significant school changes are being considered or appraised. This includes compliance with the Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010, which mandates pre-consultation requirements for rural school proposals and reinforces the importance of engaging families at the earliest stage in any decision that could affect the school's future.

3. Policy Alignment and Strategic Commitment (cont'd)

These actions support the delivery of the National Outcomes for Communities within Scotland's National Performance Framework, which commits all public bodies to help ensure that "We live in communities that are inclusive, empowered, resilient and safe" (Scottish Government, 2018). Keeping rural schools open where viable and ensuring local voices are central to decisions about their future, contributes directly to the aims of inclusive growth, community wellbeing, and place-based regeneration.

Finally, this strategy supports the Scottish Government's 2024 Action Plan to Address Depopulation, which identifies rural schools as essential infrastructure in reversing population decline. By embedding education policy in a wider place-based vision for sustainable communities, Dumfries and Galloway Council is playing its part in delivering long-term resilience and opportunity across the region.

In short, this Rural Schools Strategy is about delivering educational excellence and community wellbeing hand in hand - ensuring that the rural schools of Dumfries and Galloway continue to thrive as an integral part of our region's social fabric and future sustainability.

4. Strategic Principles for Rural Schools

Building on the above context, the Council has identified four core strategic principles for supporting and developing its rural schools. Each element is based on evidence and best practice, and together they form a comprehensive Rural Schools Strategy.

The four guiding principles are:

1. Every school should have a pupil roll that supports at least three classes, except in the most exceptional or temporary circumstances. Two-class (two-teacher) schools will be supported in remote rural communities where alternative provision is not available within a reasonable travel time for all children living in the catchment area. Where a school's roll falls to a level that would result in single-teacher provision, the Council will proactively explore alternatives - including temporary closure (mothballing) - to safeguard learner outcomes and ensure educational sustainability.
2. The Council's School Transport Policy (2023) will maintain pupils' access to education in rural areas. We commit to providing safe, reliable, and free transport for all eligible rural students to their catchment school in line with statutory requirements and local policy.
3. The Council will ensure strong community engagement and transparency in all decisions regarding rural schools, including any consideration of temporary closure (mothballing), merger, or closure.
4. The Council will deploy digital technologies and innovative e-learning solutions to enrich the curriculum and support staff in rural and remote schools through its Digital and ICT Strategy.

To ensure these strategic principles translate into meaningful outcomes for rural learners, the Council will adopt a robust implementation and monitoring framework. This framework will guide how the strategy is actioned, evaluated, and refined over time. Key components of the framework include:

- **Action Planning Aligned with Council and Learning Estate Strategy Objectives:** Each strategic principle will be underpinned by an action plan that reflects the Council's wider aims - such as equity, sustainability, and community wellbeing - and the priorities of the Learning Estate Strategy.
- **Data-Driven Decision Making:** The Council will strengthen its use of data to monitor school rolls, building capacities, travel times, educational outcomes, and community demographics. This evidence base will support proactive planning and timely interventions, ensuring decisions are transparent, equitable, and sustainable.

4. Strategic Principles for Rural School (cont'd)

- **Stakeholder Engagement:** Meaningful engagement with pupils, parents, staff, and community members will be central to the strategy's success. The Council will establish regular opportunities for dialogue, including consultation events, surveys, and local forums, to ensure rural voices are heard and reflected in decision-making.
- **Annual Reporting on School Capacities and Mothballing:** An annual report will be published detailing the capacity and enrolment status of all schools. It will also provide updates on any schools that are mothballed, including the reasons, duration, and future options under consideration. This ensures transparency and keeps communities informed about the status of their local schools.
- **Partnership Working:** The Council will collaborate with national education bodies, neighbouring local authorities, and third-sector organisations to share best practice, access additional resources, and strengthen support for rural education. These partnerships will help ensure that rural school's benefit from innovation and collective expertise.
- **Innovation and Flexibility in Rural Delivery Models:** The Council is open to exploring innovative approaches - such as multi-use education hubs, shared staffing models, and digitally enriched learning environments - where these models support positive learner outcomes and demonstrate long-term sustainability. Community-led proposals of this kind as part of an option appraisal process will be assessed on their educational merit, feasibility, and alignment with rural priorities, ensuring that innovation is both purposeful and place-sensitive.

The Council encourages communities to contribute constructively to the future of rural education through the option appraisal and statutory consultation processes. Where local groups wish to propose alternatives to closure - such as education hubs, shared staffing, catchment reorganisation, or multi-use facilities - these ideas will be welcomed and considered within the Council's option appraisal framework. Proposals should demonstrate how they support high-quality learning, align with national policy and staffing standards, and offer a realistic, affordable and sustainable solution. All contributions will be assessed transparently, with a clear emphasis on educational outcomes and learner experience.

5. Guiding Principles

The Council recognises the strength of feeling that rural communities have toward their local schools, and the important educational, cultural and social role that these schools can play. At the same time, decisions about the future of any school must be grounded in evidence, aligned with statutory duties, and capable of delivering high-quality learning experiences for all pupils, now and in the future. The four guiding principles described below respond to the complex realities of rural education - including demographic change, geographic isolation, and resource pressures - while remaining open to creative, community-informed approaches. Each element is based on research, best practice, and practical feedback, and together they form a comprehensive framework for ensuring that rural schools are supported in a fair, consistent and sustainable way.

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

Principle: Every school should have a pupil roll that supports at least three classes, except in the most exceptional or temporary circumstances. Two-class (two-teacher) schools will be supported in remote rural communities where alternative provision is not available within a reasonable travel time for all children living in the catchment area. Where a school's roll falls to a level that would result in single-teacher provision, the Council will proactively explore alternatives - including temporary closure (mothballing) - to safeguard learner outcomes and ensure educational sustainability.

Rationale: This commitment is driven by the need to safeguard quality of learning, ensure healthy social interaction for pupils, and provide professional support for staff. Research consistently shows that extremely small schools with only one teacher face significant challenges. In a single-teacher school, one individual must plan for and teach all ages and at times manage the entire school, leading to an excessive burden and practical limits on educational quality. It is difficult for one teacher alone to cover the full breadth of the curriculum effectively or to implement new curricular reforms and initiatives - studies have found that carrying out school improvement or curriculum change is difficult when the numbers of staff are very low (one-, two- or three-teacher schools) (Wilson, 2006). A lone teacher has too few colleagues to share ideas with or to specialise in subject areas, which can result in gaps or a narrower learning experience for pupils (Fargas-Malet & Bagley, 2021). This is compounded by the health and safety risks to staff and pupils associated with lone working.

Equally important are the social and developmental impacts on children. In a one-teacher school with a very small roll, pupils may have an extremely limited peer group – in some cases only a handful of children, spanning a wide age range.

5. Guiding Principles (cont'd)

This can lead to pupil isolation, as children lack same-age peers to interact and collaborate with. Opportunities for group work, team activities or age-appropriate socialisation are severely curtailed (Fargas-Malet & Bagley, 2023; Paterson, 2023). Single classes spanning 7 year groups also make it harder to ensure each child is appropriately challenged and supported at their stage of progression. While talented teachers can do a great deal with multi-age pedagogy, there are limits to how much differentiation and individual attention one person can provide when stretched across all primary stages simultaneously (Hargreaves, 2009). Maintaining at least two teachers in our most rural schools allows for grouping by developmental stage (e.g. lower and upper primary), which supports more focused teaching and ensures pupils are not educated in isolation or solely with those far outside their physical age group or stage.

Moving away from one-teacher schools also addresses teacher wellbeing. Professional isolation of staff is a known issue in very small schools – teachers in one-teacher schools often report feeling isolated and overextended, as they have no on-site colleagues for daily collaboration or support (Hargreaves, 2009; OECD, 2019). They carry the full weight of planning, preparation, assessment, and at times school management alone as described above. This can lead to stress and make it harder to maintain high standards or adopt new teaching practices. It can also hinder professional development, as there is no internal peer to observe or learn from on a daily basis. By ensuring at least two teachers in our most rural schools, we create a small team that can plan together, mentor each other, and share the workload in collaboration with a Headteacher. Even a two-teacher school allows for greater peer support and collegiality that a one-teacher school lacks, albeit not at the levels that larger schools could achieve. International experiences reinforce this approach: for example, in Finland's smallest rural schools (often with under 30 pupils), many schools operate with two teachers rather than one, and those with only one teacher have been noted as particularly challenging environments for new teachers (Fitzgerald & McGrath, 2021; Korpinen et al., 2020).

Two-class schools in our most rural areas represent a balance between 'small school' benefits and educational efficiency. With a minimum of two classes, these schools preserve the intimate scale and community feel of a remote rural school yet avoid the extreme limitations of a single-teacher setting. 'Remote rural' in this context refers to schools as defined under the Urban-Rural Classification Index where accessibility is measured in terms of drive times to an urban area (Dumfries and Galloway currently has 40 'accessible rural', 29 'remote rural' and 0 'very remote rural' schools). Educational research often defines 'small schools' as those below about 70 pupils – in practice, many of Scotland's

5. Guiding Principles (cont'd)

rural primaries fall into this category and operate with two or three classes (Fargas-Malet & Bagley, 2021). National funding mechanisms acknowledge the need to protect such schools; for instance, Scottish Government policy provides additional financial support for primary schools with rolls under 70 (Scottish Government, 2024). This reflects an understanding that economies of scale are harder to achieve in small communities, and that a degree of subsidy or flexibility is justified to keep local education accessible. Indeed, many of the European examples have moved towards a focus upon well-being, and social/spatial justice, emphasising citizens' rights to basic services wherever they wish to reside (Scottish Government, 2024).

Academically, two-teacher schools have shown they have the potential to deliver the full primary curriculum to a high standard, given the right circumstances. Such schools commonly organise multistage composite classes (e.g. P1–P3 and P4–P7 together), and research has identified effective pedagogical strategies for multi-age teaching – from peer tutoring systems to differentiated instruction – that can work well in these environments (Mulryan-Kyne, 2007; Hargreaves, 2009). Indeed, some educators point to advantages in small schools: pupils often receive more individual attention, and multi-age groupings can foster mentorship as older students help younger ones (Hargreaves, 2009). Many families and teachers value the 'family-like' atmosphere of a small school where everyone is known and where learning can be more personalised. The Council's role is to strengthen these inherent advantages through targeted support and strategic planning.

By keeping two-class schools open in our most remote locations, we also uphold parental choice and community identity. These schools often have deep historical and cultural significance in their villages, and their presence helps sustain local populations. Closing a remote rural school that still has a viable two-class roll would likely remove an incentive for young families to reside in that area, contributing to depopulation – an outcome at odds with national policy goals (Scottish Government, 2024; Paterson, 2023). Moreover, when a small school is retained, it can become a focal point for community-led initiatives (such as using the building for events, adult education, or co-location with other services), thereby maximizing its usefulness year-round. This ties into Scotland's Place Principle (Scottish Government & COSLA, 2019) and our own place-based approach: a two-class school is not just an education facility but a community hub, and supporting it yields cross-cutting benefits in community empowerment and cohesion in our most rural villages (Fargas-Malet & Bagley, 2023).

5. Guiding Principles (cont'd)

Dumfries and Galloway Council affirms that two-teacher schools remain a cornerstone of our remote rural education provision. We will champion these schools and give them the necessary support to ensure that children in even the smallest communities receive a broad, high-quality education without needing to travel long distances to attend their catchment school.

2. Maintaining Access Through School Transport

Principle: The Council will apply its School Transport Policy (2023) proactively to maintain pupils' access to education in rural areas. We commit to providing safe, reliable, and free transport for all eligible rural students to their catchment school in line with statutory requirements and local policy.

Rationale: In a rural region like Dumfries and Galloway, distance and geography are key factors in education planning. Many pupils' live miles from the nearest school, and as schools have consolidated over the years, average travel distances have increased (Fargas-Malet & Bagley, 2021). It is essential that transport does not become a barrier to education – every child has the right to attend school safely and with reasonable convenience. Long or difficult journeys can negatively affect children's educational experience. Research on rural education has noted that extensive daily travel can impact students academically, socially, and physically (Howley et al., 2001). Time spent commuting is time not available for homework, extracurricular activities, or rest, and very long bus or taxi rides (particularly for young primary pupils) can lead to fatigue and lower concentration in class (OECD, 2019; Paterson, 2023). Additionally, if travel arrangements are inadequate, students may be prevented from participating in after-school clubs or sports, which are important for a well-rounded education (Hargreaves, 2009).

The Council's transport provision is designed to minimise these impacts – including keeping one-way journey times under 30 minutes for primary schools and under 45 for secondaries (School Model Principles). This maximum travel time is below recommended national guidelines that commonly dictate no more than 30-45 minutes for primary-aged children, where possible (Scottish Government, 2010). Across Europe, there is no unified regulation on maximum travel time to school, but several countries have established national or regional guidelines to ensure pupils are not burdened by long commutes. In Germany, many federal states recommend a maximum travel time of 45 minutes for primary and 60 minutes for secondary students. Sweden considers a travel time of up to 60 minutes reasonable, with municipalities responsible for providing free transport if this is exceeded (Eurydice, 2023). In Dumfries and Galloway, buses, minibuses, taxis and free bus basses are provided alongside supporting families

5. Guiding Principles (cont'd)

with a mileage allowance to drive their child to school if they do not live near a school transport route.

Where permanent changes to the school estate are considered, we will rigorously assess the impact on travel times and ensure that any affected pupils can be transported within reasonable time limits as part of the Statutory Consultation process under the Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010 and supporting guidance. Our aim is to keep journey times as short as practicable and to avoid placing an undue travel burden on young children (Children and Young People's Commissioner Scotland, 2020). The School Transport Policy will be leveraged as a tool to support viable rural schooling options – for example, enabling pupils from a very small settlement to attend a nearby larger school if their own school is no longer sustainable, without disadvantaging those pupils (Audit Scotland, 2008). We acknowledge parental concerns about children travelling as families are understandably worried if young children have to traverse long distances or difficult routes daily.

In the context of school sustainability decisions, transport considerations will be factored into every option appraisal as part of the School Model. For any proposal to close or relocate a rural school, the Council will explicitly evaluate how far children would have to travel and what the longest journey times would be (Schools (Consultation) Act, 2010).

This adheres to national requirements – where the impact on travel arrangements must be one of the factors weighed before proceeding with a closure (Scottish Government, 2010). We will not recommend changes that result in young learners enduring unreasonable travel hardship, and we will document our transport plans as part of the consultation process. In cases where a small school is mothballed (temporarily closed) due to low or no pupil roll, we will assist any remaining or newly arrived families by providing transport to the nearest alternative school as identified by the Council during the mothball period, again to uphold access to all eligible pupils.

Ultimately, the School Transport Policy is about educational access and fairness. By actively using transport solutions, the Council ensures that rural pupils can attend school regularly and punctually, and that living in a remote location does not equate to a diminished educational opportunity. This commitment also supports parental confidence: families can choose to live in rural Dumfries and Galloway knowing that their children will have a way to get to school without undue difficulty. Reliable school transport is the lifeline that knits our dispersed communities into an inclusive learning network, and we will maintain that lifeline to keep rural education accessible for all.

5. Guiding Principles (cont'd)

3. Early and Ongoing Community Engagement

Principle: The Council will ensure strong community engagement and transparency in all decisions regarding rural schools, including any consideration of temporary closure (mothballing), merger, or closure.

Rationale: We commit to involving parents, pupils, staff, community councils, and other stakeholders from the earliest stages of discussing a school's future. This means no significant change will come as a surprise: if a school is facing difficulties (e.g. a sharply falling roll or building concerns), we will open dialogue with the school community well in advance of any formal proposal. In particular, before any decision to mothball a school, we will consult with the affected families, as per Scottish Government statutory guidance on school closures. Should a statutory school closure consultation become necessary, we will conduct it in full compliance with the Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010, including robust option appraisal, publication of an Educational Benefits Statement, public meetings, and an open invitation for community input during the process.

Deciding the future of a rural school is an issue that strikes at the heart of its community – emotionally, socially, and practically. The Council will treat closure as a true last resort, only after exploring all reasonable alternatives in partnership with the community. It is therefore essential that the process be collaborative, fair, and seen to be fair. Research shows that early, transparent engagement contributes to better outcomes and stronger community trust, even where closure is unavoidable (Fargas-Malet & Bagley, 2021; Paterson, 2023). Scottish case studies have demonstrated that lack of consultation or sudden decisions breed distrust and resentment, whereas meaningful engagement allows communities to contribute constructively to decisions (Hargreaves et al., 2009; Slee & Miller, 2015).

The Council's approach is anchored in national principles of community empowerment and legislative safeguards for rural schools. The Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015 promotes community involvement in local service decisions; we interpret this as a mandate to involve community voices in shaping the education estate. Additionally, the Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010, as amended following the Commission on the Delivery of Rural Education (2013), introduced specific provisions to protect rural schools. Notably, it established a "procedural presumption against the closure of rural schools" – effectively a requirement that any proposal to close a rural school must be strongly justified and that all other avenues are considered first (Scottish Government, 2010).

5. Guiding Principles (cont'd)

A key aspect that requires early engagement is mothballing – a temporary closure of a school without starting the formal closure process. Mothballing can be a prudent measure if a school's roll drops to near zero, allowing time to see if numbers recover. However, the decision to mothball must be handled sensitively and with community buy-in. The Scottish Government guidance explicitly states that families should be engaged at the earliest opportunity and that mothballing should only proceed where there is agreement in the community (Scottish Government, 2010; Learning Directorate Advice Note on Mothballing). If mothballing is being considered (for instance, if a school roll drops to 10 pupils or fewer), we will immediately engage local parents and inform the local community. Together, we will weigh the risks and benefits with school stakeholders. Such nuances require local insight, which is why community voices are crucial. In situations like these, we will also clarify that mothballing is not a final closure and discuss what conditions would allow the school to reopen (e.g. a minimum number of pupils returning at the next enrolment opportunity). All this will be done transparently, so that the community feels ownership of the decision rather than feeling it is imposed.

During any formal statutory consultation on a school closure, we will go beyond the minimum legal requirements to ensure meaningful dialogue. This includes early engagement through pre-consultation activities for all schools - not just rural schools - and adopting the 'presumption against closure' approach, as outlined in the Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010 – Statutory Guidance. This includes holding public meetings in the affected community at convenient times, providing clear and comprehensive information on why the change is proposed, and what the educational and community impacts would be (through the Educational Benefits Statement and Rural Impact Assessment). We will invite suggestions and proposals from community members – for example, proposals to use the school building as a multi-purpose community facility to keep it viable, or ideas to partner with a local business or charity to support the school (Hargreaves, 2009; Fargas-Malet & Bagley, 2023). In line with guidance, we will give due consideration to any reasonable alternative put forward. The law even requires us to specifically ask communities for alternative suggestions during the consultation, and we will embrace that in good faith. If an alternative is feasible and offers a better outcome for children and the community, we will pursue it instead of closure. We recognise that communities often have intimate knowledge and vested interest that can yield innovative solutions Officers might miss.

Engaging communities early should lead to better decisions. Local input can highlight factors that a purely technical

analysis might miss. For example, a community might inform us that a large employer is opening nearby which could bring new families (affecting school roll projections), or conversely that a lack of affordable housing is the real reason young families aren't staying (Scottish Government, 2024). These insights can shift how we approach the problem – maybe the solution lies in wider community development (working with housing or economic development partners) rather than closing the school. By integrating community engagement into our decision-making process, we ensure that our rural school's strategy is holistic and place-based, in line with the National Place Principle and Community Empowerment ethos (Scottish Government & COSLA, 2019).

In summary, the Council will treat the community as a partner in the decision-making process that effects rural schools, from start to finish. This respectful, transparent approach will help manage expectations and ensure that outcomes – whatever they may be – have legitimacy and that we collectively do the utmost to support the education and future of our rural children.

4. Digital Solutions for Enhanced Learning and Support

Principle: The Council will deploy digital technologies and innovative e-learning solutions to enrich the curriculum and support staff in rural and remote schools through its Digital and ICT Strategy.

Rationale: Modern technology provides tools that can transform the experience of a small rural school. A two-class school no longer needs to operate entirely on its own island; with the right digital setup, it can be connected to a network of other schools, resources, and expertise. This is particularly important for delivering a broad and balanced curriculum. By P6/P7 (upper primary), for example, pupils might benefit from subject-specific teaching (say in science or languages) that a small two-teacher staff may find challenging to cover in depth. Through digital means – such as joining a live-streamed lesson taught by a subject specialist at another school – those rural pupils can access learning that would otherwise be unavailable in their setting. Research supports the effectiveness of such approaches when implemented well (OECD, 2019). We will invest in robust digital infrastructure (such as high-speed internet connectivity for all our school sites) and make use of Scotland's national digital learning platforms, as well as local initiatives, to ensure that even the smallest school is not geographically isolated from educational opportunity.

These models allow students to interact beyond their own school and give teachers a way to co-teach and collaborate. Dumfries and Galloway will ensure these conditions are met: we will provide the necessary hardware (interactive

5. Guiding Principles (cont'd)

panels, cameras, secure platforms) and technical support to our rural schools, schedule joint activities at convenient times, train our teachers in using virtual learning environments, and coordinate curricula where required so that, for instance, two schools can work on the same topic simultaneously. By doing so, even a small class can effectively 'join' a larger class virtually for certain lessons – creating a richer peer group interaction for pupils and reducing planning load for teachers who can share teaching duties with a colleague online (OECD, 2015).

Digital solutions also address the issue of staff support and professional isolation. Teachers and headteachers in rural schools often have limited on-site colleagues to consult or collaborate with. Through digital connectivity, we can set up professional learning communities that meet online, virtual mentoring, and peer observation via video. In Finland, experiments with virtual learning environments connecting small rural schools showed that teachers greatly appreciated the collaboration it enabled – it supported their professional development and reduced their professional isolation (Niemi, 2021). This is a powerful outcome: it means teachers in a small school still feel part of a team and can continuously improve their practice by learning from others. Our strategy includes participation in initiatives like e-Sgoil, the national digital learning school established by Comhairle nan Eilean Siar and now used across Scotland, which provides remote teaching and tutoring, and using Glow, the national digital platform supported by Education Scotland, to share resources and promote collaboration.

For students, digital tools will enhance curriculum delivery and access. In secondary education digital solutions can allow pupils to take courses not available in their local school (for example, a pupil in a small secondary could join a higher-level course taught at another school via video link) through cluster consortium arrangements and our DGConnect offering. This can be motivating and also helps develop digital skills and independent learning habits in our pupils, which are essential for the future and higher learning (Scottish Government, 2016). Importantly, digital inclusion is a priority: we will ensure every rural school has up-to-date IT equipment and that no child is left behind due to connectivity issues.

It's also worth noting that embracing digital does not mean compromising the personal, community-oriented nature of rural schools. Rather, it augments it. Students remain in their smaller, nurturing local environment but gain windows into the wider world. One researcher described this as helping rural youth to have both 'roots and wings' – staying connected to their local roots while virtually exploring broader horizons (Hargreaves, 2009). This is aligned with our vision: we want our remote rural learners to enjoy the benefits of their close-knit school communities and have

5. Guiding Principles (cont'd)

access to the same breadth of learning opportunities as any student in a larger urban school. The OECD and other international bodies have noted that technology is a key enabler for rural education equity, allowing rural students to overcome distance and access high-quality instruction and resources (e.g. online libraries, educational software) that were once out of reach (OECD, 2019). By staying at the forefront of educational technology, Dumfries and Galloway's rural schools can turn their small size into an advantage – nimble environments quick to adopt new tools – and truly deliver a 21st-century education.

The Dumfries and Galloway Digital and ICT Strategy will focus on connectivity, collaboration, and innovation to the benefit of rural schools. We will monitor and evaluate the impact of these digital interventions, seeking feedback from staff and students. Early evidence from our own pilot activities and from academic research is encouraging – when small schools network together and with their local authorities, they are able to offer a rich learning environment to students in isolated parts (OECD, 2019). We are committed to making that richness a reality in Dumfries and Galloway. Through smart use of technology, our rural schools will not only be sustained but will flourish, offering a truly broad, supportive, and modern learning experience despite their remote locations. This digital embrace complements all the other elements of our Rural Schools Strategy – it is another means by which we ensure that geography is not destiny for our young people's education.

6. Conclusion

Dumfries and Galloway's Rural Schools Strategy recognises the unique role that rural schools play in the educational, social, and economic fabric of our region. These schools are more than places of learning - they are community anchors, providers of stability for families, and vital enablers of rural sustainability. In many cases, the local school is 'the heart of the community' (Fargas-Malet & Bagley, 2023) and contributes directly to social capital and local resilience (Hargreaves, 2009).

At the same time, we must acknowledge the complex challenges that rural education in Scotland faces. Population decline, limited housing, staff recruitment difficulties, and shrinking school rolls all present risks to sustainability (Paterson, 2023; Scottish Government, 2024). The number of children aged 0–15 in Dumfries and Galloway is projected to fall by around 14% between 2018 and 2028 (National Records of Scotland), affecting future viability for many rural schools. These pressures require clear guiding principles and measured, realistic and achievable responses.

This strategy sets out a balanced framework for supporting rural schools wherever it is reasonable and sustainable to do so. Our four core commitments - supporting viable two-class provision in remote rural areas, maintaining school access through transport, ensuring early and ongoing community engagement, and investing in digital solutions - are grounded in best practice and a strong evidence base. They reflect recommendations from the OECD (Echazarra & Radinger, 2019), national Scottish policy, and academic studies on small school effectiveness (Fargas-Malet & Bagley, 2021).

We align our approach with Scotland's Place Principle (Scottish Government & COSLA, 2019), which promotes joined-up, collaborative, and community-led planning of public services and assets. We also uphold the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015, which gives communities a legal right to be involved in decisions affecting them - and the Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010, as amended after the Commission on the Delivery of Rural Education, which places a presumption against the closure of rural schools unless fully justified (Scottish Government, 2010). These policies underpin our commitment to transparency, accountability, and local voice in rural school decisions.

We also support national priorities to address rural depopulation, as set out in the Scottish Government's Depopulation Action Plan 2024, which explicitly identifies access to education as a factor in helping rural areas remain viable. The presence or absence of a local school can strongly influence whether families choose to settle or remain in an area (Slee & Miller, 2015), and research shows that school closures may contribute to a negative cycle of outmigration and further ageing of the population (Paterson, 2023).

6. Conclusion (cont'd)

Where a rural school is no longer viable, the Council will act responsibly and openly, using the full process set out in legislation and national guidance, including educational benefits statements, rural impact assessments, and early engagement with affected communities (Scottish Government, 2021). Our strategy reflects the conclusion of Education Scotland and the OECD that place-based educational planning is critical in rural contexts (OECD, 2015; Scottish Government, 2023).

We are also forward-looking. By embracing digital tools and virtual networks, we ensure even our smallest schools are connected to wider learning and professional communities. Evidence from Finland and Scotland's own e-Sgoil programme shows how such innovations can help overcome isolation, strengthen curriculum delivery, and support staff development in remote settings (OECD, 2019; Hargreaves, 2009).

Through the four strategic commitments detailed above, Dumfries and Galloway Council's Learning Estate Strategy will proactively support the sustainability and success of our rural schools. In doing so, we reaffirm that rural schools are valued pillars of their communities – to be maintained and enhanced whenever possible, not seen as liabilities. This Rural Schools Strategy is founded on a clear evidence base from Scotland and internationally, aligning local action with national policy frameworks such as the Place Principle, the Community Empowerment Act, and the Scottish Government's agenda for sustainable rural communities. By prioritising educational quality, social value, and community partnership, we will navigate the challenges of rural depopulation and resource constraints in a compassionate yet practical manner.

The Council's guiding ethos will be one of place-based respect: every village and town matters, and every child, regardless of postcode, deserves an excellent education and the chance to prosper in their own community. We will support rural schools where it is reasonable and feasible to do so – and by deploying thoughtful policies on staffing, school configuration, transport, community engagement, and digital innovation, we will make it feasible more often. In doing so, we aim to secure a vibrant future for our rural schools, so that they can continue to nurture children and communities for generations to come, truly living up to the vision of inclusive, empowered and sustainable communities across Dumfries and Galloway.

Photo: Dumfries High School