

Received answer**1. Name of Organisation (if appropriate)**

Scottish Rural Schools Network

2. Title (e.g. Mr/Ms/Mrs/Miss/Dr)

Mr

3. Surname

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8. I am responding as

A group or organisation

9. Do you consider yourself or your organisation as from or representing:

A rural area

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

Yes

13. Which of the following best describes your organisation? (Please select one option only)

Community Organisation

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

Strongly disagree

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

Strongly disagree

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

All schools face challenges in successfully delivering Curriculum for Excellence. These challenges will vary from school to school depending on both the type of school and its particular circumstances. HMIE reports have commented on the delivery of CFE for the last few years. It is striking how many of the schools highlighted for praise in their delivery of CFE are small rural schools, for example Minard (12 pupils), Arrocher (56), Uyeasound (11), Fair Isle(10), Crainlarach (27), Lethnot (6), Tarfside(12), Colvend (32), Crathes (27), Auchnagatt (51).

It is ironic that two of these schools were threatened with closure by their local authorities (after publication of the HMIE reports) citing inability to deliver CFE as a reason for closure – without any supporting evidence. One, Uyeasound has subsequently closed= the other, Minard, remains under threat pending the end of the moratorium.

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

It might be more appropriate to ask what lessons larger schools, with greater resources, can learn from the smallest schools. HMIE reports make it clear that small schools have been delivering many of the elements and using many of the techniques of CFE for many years. This evidence fits with what we have been told by many teachers in small rural schools – that for them CFE represents a relatively small change in practice compared with much larger schools.

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

A study of secondary schools in Scotland which take only pupils from small rural schools shows that educational attainment at age 16 in this group is well above the national average and in most cases well above the individual authority average. Even when social deprivation factors are considered it is noted that many of these remote rural schools are not located in the most disadvantaged areas yet the children are performing at a very high level.

There is no doubt that small class size, continuity of relationships with teachers, close parental and community involvement in the school and the mixed age class structure are conducive to high levels of educational attainment. There are exceptions to this general trend but it is exceptionally clear from evidence from across the world that the small rural school can be highly educationally effective.

<http://archive.scottish.parliament.uk/s3/committees/ellc/inquiries/Schools%20Bill/documents/ScottishRuralSchoolsNetworksupplementary.pdf>

It is regularly claimed by Local Authorities that the socialisation of children is adversely affected in small rural schools. A report issued by Angus Council in 1997 specifically raised the subject of social dysfunction in rural children. This has been a regular feature of school consultations since. When challenged under Freedom of Information legislation to provide evidence for the assertions Angus Council were forced to concede that any evidence they had was "largely anecdotal".

It is common for consultation proposals across Scotland to raise this subject in a similarly unevicenced matter. A recent video produced by Aberdeenshire Council has made similar claims and as yet they have not produced any statistical evidence to support the assertions made. They are currently refusing to release the DVD to members of the public who request it under FOI legislation.

In reality there has been very little research work undertaken in Scotland on the socialisation of rural school children but there is a vast body of work undertaken world-wide on the group of children with the smallest peer group of all – the home educated. Home educators are regularly accused of disadvantaging their children but research shows that far from social disadvantages most children benefit in their social development. The educational theorist Vygotsky (himself home educated) demonstrated that children learn social skills from adults and older peers. It is all the more strange that a Quality Improvement Officer in Argyll claimed during the 2010 consultation exercise there, that Vygotsky's work supported the Council's claims of social dysfunction.

Wertsch, J. V. (1985). Vygotsky and the social formation of mind.. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press

Numerous research studies have shown that children who have above average contact with older peers and adults react better socially when set team tasks. It has even been found that the behaviour of a whole group improves when a home educated child is added to a team task of single age group educated children.

Larry Shyers, Comparison of Social Adjustment between Home and Traditionally Schooled Students PhD. diss., University of Florida, 1992.

All evidence from Scotland's rural school estate would indicate that many of the alumni go on to hold positions in later life of high social standing. A study of the 129 MSPs in the last session of the Scottish Parliament found a much higher number of rural school graduates than you would expect from the general population. This is not a profession anyone suffering from severe social dysfunction would choose to enter.

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

The influence of a single poorly performing teacher can be more obvious in a very small school. This is something that should be, and usually is, quickly identified by the responsible local authority.

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

Strongly disagree

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

The close involvement of individual teachers and children, close links between school, family and community mean that it is most unlikely for individual children's needs to be overlooked, and more likely that a holistic approach to ensuring that children reach their full potential can be adopted.

22. Q5

Angus Council have recently reported that they have little difficulty in attracting and retaining class teachers to rural primary schools. It is understood that the current oversupply of newly qualified teachers has resulted in this being the case in all but the most isolated areas. It would appear to be more difficult to recruit head teachers to small rural schools and this is something which could be addressed by innovations agreed through the normal SNCT procedures. It should be possible to make the position of head teacher in a rural school part of a career progression system which sees it viewed as a stepping stone. Experience would indicate that a number of teachers who would take this as a career move would then decide to stay in position. Valerie Wilson's study (<http://www.ser.stir.ac.uk/pdf/64.pdf>) outlines the perceptions of head teachers in Scotland and would indicate that the increase in bureaucracy in recent years is

viewed a major problem to combining the roles of teaching and managing a school. One solution might be to appoint an administrator to handle routine matters for a cluster of rural schools, thereby freeing up teachers to commit to the roles for which they are best suited.

Children, parents and communities in rural areas are fully aware that they are unlikely to be provided with all weather pitches, video editing suites, state of the art gymnasiums or similar facilities. The vast majority see this as an acceptable trade off for other facets of education which they consider to be advantageous. Studies have shown that certain aspects of school buildings do have educational benefits and it is essential that all schools have adequate temperature control, are well lit, especially with natural light, and that the children feel safe. The same studies have shown little long term benefit in the "bells and whistles" attached to many modern builds and this should be kept in mind when maintaining and developing the rural school estate.

Roy Bridge Primary School in Highland was one of the worst condition schools in Scotland in 2008. Highland Council unanimously approved a limited spend to bring the school up to an adequate standard and a "system build" classroom was provided to replace demolished huts. The existing Victorian classroom was upgraded and the playground facilities greatly improved. All of this was done for a much lower cost than the option of extending the PPP school at Spean Bridge to accommodate the Roy Bridge children.

Logie Coldstone in Aberdeenshire was completely rebuilt a few years ago with a sectional "log cabin" type structure. These can be built at much lower cost than conventional builds, fit well into the rural environment and have a very short build time.

Newlands School in Scottish Borders has worked with Scottish Borders Council to provide community facilities on the school site which provides a community hub which can also be utilised by the school. This has left the Council free to prioritise work on the classrooms at a much lower overall cost that rebuilding an entire school. This is attracting the interest of other communities in Scottish Borders and further afield.

Eassie Primary in Angus was threatened with closure in 2008, when the local village hall had serious structural problems and could no longer provide physical education facilities for the school. The Eassie community managed to retain the school and have just opened a state of the art community facility which the school can utilise.

It is clear there is a desire in rural communities to work with Councils to overcome perceived deficiencies in the school estate. To their great credit, some Councils such as Scottish Borders are already embracing this challenge.

New technologies mean that children in even the most remote island locations are no longer divorced from the wider world. The Glow Network is an advancement in this field but many school communities go further than this. In Fair Isle the school produces the only newspaper on the island with each of the 9 children having a role in its publication but the island is also a designated nature reserve. The children are responsible for collecting and processing data on topics such as nesting times and numbers which are published and disseminated to a worldwide audience.

With agreement, it is possible that new models could be introduced for use in the most remote of communities rather than hostel very young children. It should now be possible to have a community facility with direct video and voice link to a teacher and classroom in a mainland location. The child or children could be supervised by a local person trained for the purpose. This could then be supplemented by visits of the child to the mainland classroom and visits by a teacher to the remote location. This is a model that has been successfully used elsewhere in the world.

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

Strongly agree

24. (b) Please explain your answer or suggest any alternative

It has been represented to SRSN by a number of urban community groups with whom we have worked, that many of the provisions in the Act relating to rural schools are as applicable to their situation as to rural schools. We believe that there is merit in this argument as, if implemented, factors that were not relevant (such as the community effect if two schools serving the same communities were to be amalgamated) could be addressed very simply in the proposal document.

We specifically support the idea that schools in the "Remote Small Town" classification should be brought within the scope of the additional considerations for rural schools laid out in the Act and the statutory guidance.

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

Strongly agree

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

Most of our concerns are not about the framework for the Educational Benefit statement as laid down in the Act or the Statutory Guidance, but about how it has been used in closure proposals.

While the legislation (backed by the statutory guidance) is clear that the EBS should look at "likely effects" of a proposal, some Councils have chosen to use the title of Educational Benefit to justify only including claimed positive effects in proposal papers, rather than a balanced view. An example of this is the recent large scale closure proposal in Argyll and Bute where the Executive Director of Community Services told a meeting of the full Council on 2nd November 2010 that the Council was only required to look at the benefits of its proposal, not at any dis-benefit.

The legislation requires Councils to back any claims with reasons and evidence, again we have seen very few examples of this. For example many Educational Benefit Statements have claimed benefits from children being moved into new buildings, but no evidence at all that a new building in itself improves education compared to an adequate older building. What published evidence there is, eg:

Higgins S, Hall E, Wall K, Woolner P, McCaughey C. The Impact of School Environments: A literature review. London: Design Council, 2005,

shows that there is little if any long term impact on attainment.

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

We have seen few examples where Councils have taken the requirements regarding viable alternatives to closure, or the impact on local the local community remotely seriously, despite the clear requirement to do so. At least one Council has gone so far as to state that a community cannot exist without a built up area, and since there was no built area there was therefore no community impact (East Ayrshire Council - Crossroads proposal).

Shetland Islands Council proposal to close Uyeasound school illustrated some common failings. While the duty on the Council is to investigate these issues before proposing the closure of a rural school, the socio-economic study into the likely effects of closure was only published after the end of the consultation period, denying the community the opportunity to take account of its findings in responding to the consultation. The same proposal did not explain what alternatives to closure had been examined= numerous respondents queried this lack, and although SIC's consultation report this listed the omission, it did not respond to it, despite the legislation requiring Councils to reply to allegations of omissions.

Many Councils have attempted to fulfil the requirement to examine the likely effect of a school's closure on the community by simply listing community lets of the school building and showing that these might be accommodated elsewhere. This is a gross oversimplification of the role of a school in a community

The use of school buildings outwith school hours is not an indicator of its place in the community. Often the village hall is central to community activity outside school hours but this facility in turn depends upon the school for much of its income and use. Without the input of school plays, concerts, sporting activities and fund raisers these facilities often suffer. This is why the current legislation has the requirement for a community impact assessment to be undertaken. Any thorough consultation will identify the position of the school in the community. If the school has no input into community life this will become evident.

We have seen a limited number of cases where these factors have been considered in a detailed and thoughtful manner. These include Perth & Kinross's School Estate Review of 2010/11.

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

We believe that the current requirements of the legislation would be adequate if implemented by those Councils currently failing to do so. It may be that still more explicit wording in the statutory guidance would help, but ultimately enforcement action through the call-in process is needed. SRSN has been very disappointed that some of the most flagrant breaches of the law have been ignored in this process.

We are very concerned that there is pressure from some Councils and from COSLA to water down these requirements. Some Councils seem aggrieved that they are expected to consider the individual cases of each school when proposing mass closures, and this is reflected in Cosla internal position paper Briefing for Cosla Commission Members - Issues raised at Cosla working group 16 August 2011.

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

Government guidance is not being consistently followed across all Councils. There is evidence to show (and we can provide this to the commission if required) that condition and suitability ratings determined in accordance with the guidance by professional surveyors is being altered by education department officials ahead of closure consultations. This practice undermines public confidence in the entire school estate rating system and the efficient management of the school estate.

30. (b) Assess the capacity of primary and secondary schools?

Government guidance on capacity measurement is neither clear nor mandatory, and is interpreted very differently by different Councils. This leads to widely differing capacities being quoted for very similarly sized schools in different areas. Two examples:

School	m ²	Capacity	School	m ²	Capacity
Lochnell (Argyll & Bute)	736	177	Arnage (Aberdeenshire)	746	71
North Bute (Argyll & Bute)	394	114	Longhaven (Aberdeenshire)	396	47

(The Argyll & Bute capacities are those relied on in recent closure proposals)

The government guidance specifies a number of measures, the "planning capacity" is particularly unhelpful as it takes no account of maximum class sizes for different age groups or composite classes and accordingly suggests entirely unobtainable capacities.

31. (c) Manage and measure local information such as projected population numbers and pupil rolls?

Again practice varies widely, some Councils look at a wide range of indicators to build as complete a picture as possible, but some take a single measure and rely on it even where other indicators clearly indicate a contrary trend. Examples of this that we have seen include taking projections for pupil numbers in all schools and applying them to primary school rolls, taking national projections and applying them to a single small community, relying on out-of-date projections when figures for actual births are available and show a rising rather than falling trend. In general there is confusion between projections which by definition are created by extrapolating past events, and predictions which can account for new factors.

The danger of employing flawed methods can be seen in the increasing acute shortage of primary school places in much of England, where the reversal in the trend in birth rates happened a few years before it did in Scotland. However Scotland already has its share of new schools that have been completed in recent years and are already at capacity (for example in Forfar and Camoustie in Angus).

Projections of school roles in Moray made during the 2005 closure proposals show how things can go wrong. This is a limited selection, in some cases the forecasts proved accurate, but the degree to which individual forecasts can be wrong (in both directions) shows the limitation of such forecasts. It should be noted that in the time frame considered, nearly all the children making up the 2011 rolls would already have been born in 2005 – no prediction of future birth rates was required:

School	Actual 2005	Projected 2011	Actual 2011
Dyke	85	40	90
Craigellachie	53	42	72
Rothiemay	64	32	54
Alves	69	51	35
Glenlivet	33	25	17

The most thorough approach we have seen is that taken by Highland Council, where a wide range of factors are taken into account and are frequently revised.

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

Don't know/ Not applicable

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

Don't know/ Not applicable

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

We have seen a very wide range of quality in the closure proposals made under the Act, hence our Not Applicable response to Q 10 (a) & (b). We have seen some examples of what would regard as good practice from:

South Ayrshire
Scottish Borders
Orkney (only informal conducted since the Act came into force)
Perth & Kinross

We have also seen much that we would regard as poor or very poor practice from:

Aberdeenshire
Shetland
Highland (only informal conducted since the Act came into force)
Angus
Argyll & Bute
East Ayrshire

We believe that the poor practices that we have seen come not from any failing in the procedures laid down in the Act or the statutory guidance, but from failures to carry out consultations in either the spirit or the letter of the Act.

Changes to the legislation will not improve consultation unless its provisions are enforced

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

Strongly agree

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

We have strongly supported the involvement of HMIE in the process, but we are disappointed in how this has operated in practice. In particular we are disturbed by certain inconsistencies in HMIE's approach.

HMIE have been very consistent in their routine reporting of rural schools. They have regularly given exemplary reports and highlighted best practice in individual rural schools, some of which have gone on to be threatened with closure. Schools such as Eassie and Arbirlot in Angus, Dallas and Inveravon in Moray, Uyeasound and Fair Isle in Shetland, Minard and others in Argyll have been shown to be sector leading. At the same time HMIE have not been afraid to highlight failing rural schools such as (at that time) Tomintoul in Moray. It is surprising to those who regularly study the very individual school reports to view the style of reporting which has taken place under the Schools (Consultation) Act. It appears to be very formulaic, with many sections simply copy and pasted from one school report to another. Despite huge differences in the type of schools reported on the conclusions, appear to be very similar.

In their submission to the Commission on Rural Education HMIE claim to have been critical of Local Authorities' approach to matters such as educational benefit statement preparation. On reading the reports it is difficult to get the sense of criticism which HMIE claim to be there and which is very evident when they find failings in their normal reporting system.

A number of school communities have complained that HMIE are reluctant to engage directly with them and instead are content to rely upon information supplied to them by Local Authorities. In a number of cases the final reports produced by Councils are somewhat different to the proposals which HMIE comment upon. There is a strong argument that the HMIE report should not be included in the Council's final report but issued some time after it is published. This should then reflect on any changes made to the proposal.

An example of this was at Scalloway Junior High on Shetland where the original proposals were that nearly all the subject teachers would transfer to Lerwick with the pupils. HMIE rightly reflected that this minimum loss in teaching staff should maintain average class sizes and not lead to any significant deterioration in choice or standards. The final document which was voted through by councillors had a reduction in teaching staff of around 10 subject teachers. This obviously has an impact on class sizes and the number of teachers available for any given subject. The HMIE report was not altered in any way to reflect upon these significant changes.

Similarly at Crossroads in East Ayrshire, HMIE's conclusion directly relied on assurances from East Ayrshire Council on financial savings and class sizes at the new school. These factors were both disputed, with detailed evidence, by objectors at the time and were subsequently shown to be incorrect. The fact that was any dispute about these matters was not mentioned by HMIE. In rejecting call-in requests, the Scottish Government in turn specifically relied on HMIE's conclusion.

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

Disagree

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

During the consultation phase of the Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act, SRSN argued for call-ins to be dealt with by an independent panel. This was a point we were prepared to be persuaded on after reassurance were given that the process would be effective, because its openness and transparency would force it to be fair.

We have not however been impressed by the operation of the call-in process in practice. We have some sympathy with those Councils who have complained that they have not been able to see from the results of call-in requests or call-ins themselves, what they should be doing in their own closure proposals.

In many cases, communities have prepared highly detailed cases laying out the deficiencies that they see in the process, yet the only response from the government is to be told that the closure is not to be called in. In such a process, one would at least hope to see a point by point response explaining the decision= without this the applicant can have little faith in the justice of decision. Even when call-ins are made, little or no explanation is given to the applicant or the Council concerned in the final decision. Councils as well as call-in applicants suffer in such cases as they (and other reading the decisions) cannot learn from them.

The involvement of Ministers in the decision process inevitably leads some of those dissatisfied with the decision (on either side) to make accusations of political bias. In the absence of detailed judgements, such accusations cannot be credibly refuted and tend to undermine public confidence in the system.

Applicants for call-in often see the process as one-sided, in that there is private correspondence and frequently meetings between the Scottish Government's education department and the Council in question, to which they are not party. In particular applicants feel that they should be able to challenge further information provided to the government if that is appropriate. Again this lack of transparency undermines confidence in the fairness of the system.

SRSN believes that the exercise of the call-in powers by an independent panel, operating transparently, could restore confidence in the system.

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

Dissatisfied

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

We believe that are areas where the guidance could be improved. SRSN participated in the working party that drafted new guidance in early 2011, that would have resolved these issues and regret that the revised guidance was not issued following intervention by Cosla. We believe that clearer and more robust guidance would lead to fewer requests for call-in and fewer decisions being overturned.

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

The current LGF funding mechanism for local authorities makes provision for the various factors affecting the costs of delivery of services in each Council's circumstances, taking into account elements such as population, age profile, deprivation levels and rurality. Primary schools are funded through an element in the mechanism which is principally based on the cost of providing teaching staff (much the largest element in the cost of primary schools). This figure is then adjusted by a factor based on the proportion of pupils in small rural schools, to compensate Councils for the additional costs involved. A comparison of the additional funds provided by this mechanism with the additional costs incurred by a selection of rural Councils for whom we have figures is instructive.

Moray Council are typical of Council who claim that they are under funded for providing education in a number of rural schools. In fact the funding mechanism allocates £1.7 million of additional funding compared to a situation where they had no rural school pupils. Moray have 15 rural schools which benefit from the funding mechanism which averages over £113K per school. Moray publish all the Devolved School Management budgets for these schools and analysis of these clearly shows that not only is Moray well compensated for the additional costs but that the allocated monies are not all being spent on these schools. In real terms the rural schools are subsidising other aspects of Moray's budget.

A similar exercise in Angus shows that the funding mechanism allocates £1.9 million for 19 schools or £100k per school. A similar analysis of DSM budgets shows that again the current financial model more than allows for the additional expenditure involved.

During the recent closure consultation in Argyll a parent there completed a detailed analysis of the financial model in Argyll. It showed that even in an area with a relatively large number of very small schools, the financial model and actual costs were almost in balance. <http://forargyll.com/2011/06/the-reality-rural-schools-and-the-council-purse>

As can be seen, some Councils are not just achieving Best Value from their rural schools, but are actually managing to subsidise their larger schools from their small schools.

During many school closure consultations Local Authorities have claimed large financial savings could be made from school closure programmes. On most occasions it has been found that the Local Authority in question has not understood how they are funded or the financial impact on the authority of closing schools. SRSN has had to explain to senior officials (mainly Directors of Finance) how the Green Book system works and in particular how the Council Tax element of their Revenue Grant works. In 2005 Moray made no allowance at all for the loss of Revenue Grant when outlining savings of closing up to 21 schools. Later that year Scottish Borders Council acknowledged an impact from closing Channellkirk Primary School but still made serious errors in its final assessment. In 2008 Angus Council made no reference to loss of grant at all in the initial proposal paper but incorporated it in the final paper after intervention by SRSN. They still miscalculated the Council Tax element but readily corrected this when it was pointed out.

In 2006 Highland Council's Director of Education made erroneous statements to elected members on the loss of grant immediately prior to achieving a successful vote to close Roy Bridge Primary. In 2007/8 SRSN assisted the Roy Bridge community in challenging those statements. Not only did Highland reject the challenge but they employed an independent consultant to verify the Council's position. A Freedom of Information request revealed that the "independent consultant" was the same individual who had given the original opinion while under some pressure from the Director of Education to "come up with a response". Independent analysis by a leading team of economists verified SRSN's figures and elected members unanimously voted to reverse the decision to close Roy Bridge.

<http://www.inverness-courier.co.uk/News/Consultant-paid-by-council-to-review-her-own-work-10566.htm>

During the closure of Crossroads Primary in East Ayrshire the Director of Finance made an error in calculation of the Council tax element of the Revenue Grant and when challenged by SRSN, was forced to retract and reissue the proposal document.

In the recent closure consultation in Argyll major errors were made by the Director Of Finance in calculating the Revenue Grant loss. Even when telephoned by SRSN about the errors a few days after publication of the proposal documents the Council took no action. Well into the consultation the Council refused to accept SRSN's position that they had made major errors culminating in a press release by the Council of December 17th 2010 which heavily criticised SRSN's approach.

<http://www.argyll-bute.gov.uk/education-and-learning/response-allegations-made-arsn>

On the 5th January 2011 SRSN produced a report, and gave a presentation to, the full Argyll Council. This report detailed exactly where the errors had been made and quoted SRSN's experience with our Local authorities as above. The full set of proposals to close schools in Argyll was withdrawn the same day.

It is clear there is a failure within Local Authorities to understand how they are funded but the more worrying aspect is that even when informed of their misunderstandings a number of them continue to obfuscate the situation for considerable period of time. The case where Angus Council readily took on board the errors and made speedy and public corrections is to be commended. Some of the other cases encountered by SRSN fall very far short of best practice.

There have been representations from some quarters that the funding mechanism is "Byzantine" and that it should be dramatically simplified. Just because someone does not understand something neither makes it complicated nor ineffective. A large number of SRSN members have become proficient in the Green Book system in their own time simply by showing some interest in the subject. Cosla officials and many of the Local authority representatives agree that it is a long established mechanism which has evolved to be the best possible measure of Local Authority "needs" in distributing the national "pot" available. In a Scotland with 32 Local Authorities as diverse as those that exist in Scotland this is no mean feat. It would be a mistake to radically alter a system that works, simply because a few people who should understand it, don't.

The full figures and methodology of the Green Book system are all available on the Scottish Government's website:

<http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Statistics/18209/201112Settlement/GreenBook201112>

SRSN have repeatedly demonstrated, most recently in Argyll, that most rural school closure proposals show that any savings on property running costs are outweighed by additional transport costs and loss of Revenue Grant. This results in savings, if any at all, coming from a reduction in teaching staff. It is hard to see how reductions in teaching staff numbers result in educational benefit for anyone.

We recommend that the Commission considers talking oral evidence from Professor Neil Kay, Emeritus Professor of Economics at Strathclyde University, who has studied the economics of rural school provision over many years.

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

Covered in our response to Question 14.

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

For many years, research has demonstrated the clear links between rural sustainability and local, high quality, education provision. In particular the mutually supportive links between school and other community activities and facilities. These go well beyond the immediate families of current school children.

When giving evidence to the Scottish Parliament during the passage of the Schools (Consultation) Act, the Scottish Rural Property and Business Association said:

"The importance of Scotland's rural schools cannot be seen simply in educational terms, although that is clearly of immense significance. For rural areas, more so than urban areas, the community function of the school is of vital importance. Rural communities often revolve around the local school with interaction between schools, churches and community groups. The school building itself also often has a community function.

In the wider context of the rural economy, the loss of a local school may have negative implications for the future rural workforce in that locality. Closure of a school may result in families either moving away from a particular locality or dissuading families from moving to a locality. This decline in population has knock on effects for other rural services, and the rural economy generally."

We agree with these comments. Similarly in 2008, the Royal Society of Edinburgh's Inquiry into the Future of Scotland's Hills and Islands, identified "availability of locally-based schools" as a key issue in retaining and developing viable communities. The report went on to say "Accessibility to pre-school, primary and secondary schools is a major factor in retaining young families in rural areas and in enticing others to locate there." and "...in the broader context of vibrant rural communities, this provision is essential"

SRSN is concerned that there is a developing trend, among a number of local authorities and other organizations anxious to reduce rural school provision, to claim that there is no evidence for a link between community sustainability and school provision. These claims have not been supported by evidence and fly in the face

of many years research.

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

Amongst the wide variety of literature available world wide, two reports that make particular reference to Scottish experience are:

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

Jonathan P. Sher, et al, Rural Education in Urbanized Nations: Issues and Innovations. An OECD/CERI Report, Westview Press 1981.

We would strongly recommend that the Commission take oral evidence from Dr Bronwen Cohen and Dr Jonathan Sher of Children in Scotland, each of whom have particular expertise in the area. Dr Sher is one of the authors of the OECD report cited above.

Additionally the Commission might be aided by speaking to the economist Mr Steve Westbrook who conducted a socio-economic study on the proposed closure of Skerries Secondary School.

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

SRSN is very concerned at the narrowness for the continuing debate on rural schools in Scotland. Many rural Councils seem to regard their small schools as at best an irritant and at worst a major obstacle to education delivery. For these Councils almost any argument, whether rational, evidenced or not seems to be good enough if it leads to school closures. Even entirely self-contradictory arguments are made, such as putting forward the view that small rural schools are educationally un-viable while simultaneously conferring an unjustified educational advantage on over-privileged rural pupils.

In passing the Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010 unanimously, Parliament made its will in this matter abundantly clear. It is now for the Scottish Government to implement the will of Parliament through two avenues – first to ensure that Parliament's intentions are properly enforced, but secondly and most importantly to provide clear and helpful guidance to Councils in implementing this policy.

The Scottish Government's Schools department and Education Scotland have important roles to play in this by providing research, guidance and support to Councils in areas such as:

- Developing appropriate staffing structures for small schools
- Cost-effective solutions for refurbishing small schools
- Research into and implementation of distance learning techniques
- Guidance on delivery of CFE in small schools
- Publication of best practice examples specific to small schools

Much of this happens already, but in a limited and isolated manner. Central government has resources not available to individual Councils, to research these and other matters, both in Scotland and abroad, and present it in a format that is of practical use to those on the ground.

SRSN is also concerned about the lack of joined up thinking, within rural development policy – at central government level, in central government' relation ship with local government, and within local government itself. Frequently education policy is decided entirely in isolation from other responsibilities. This problem was highlighted in detail in the Royal Society of Edinburgh's report of 2008 cited above, and requires action across government to resolve. The RSE report makes unfavourable comparison with the way that rural development duties are tackled in Scandinavia