MAKING THE CASE for RURAL SCHOOLS

A Rural Forum Guide for Parents

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PREPARED BY THE Scottish Consumer Council
This guide is aimed at parents of school-age children who live in Scotland, and who wish to see their children educated in rural schools. It gives arguments in favour of keeping and improving rural schools. It also gives practical advice on how to use these arguments - in persuasion, lobbying or full-scale campaigning.
SUPPORT FOR RURAL SCHOOLS - YOU ARE NOT ALONE!

The chances are that, since you are reading this, you are in favour of keeping and improving small rural schools. Indeed it may well be that you have got hold of this booklet because there is a threat to your local school.

You are not alone - either in the views that you hold or the threat you face. Many village schools have closed in recent years in Scotland. Different reasons have been given.

(a) The total number of school-age children has dropped. True - though it is now rising, as indeed is the population of rural Scotland.

(b) Local authorities need to save money. True - but it is open to question how much money really is saved by closing local schools and bussing children elsewhere.

(c) Schools below a certain size are too small to provide a proper education. Debatable - there is now strong evidence that there are educational advantages in
children being taught in small rural schools, at least as strong as the evidence the other way.

A debate has raged, not only in communities threatened with the loss of their local school, but also at national level. Indeed, within the United Kingdom there is a growing body of opinion that a positive case can be made for small country schools. This view is held by the increasingly active rural lobby – Rural Forum in Scotland, and Rural Voice in England. As a general principle they support keeping and improving services in rural areas. Moreover, members of parents' organisations who favour parents having an increasing say in how their children are taught, support the wishes of rural parents who want their children taught in rural schools.

The evidence shows that the overwhelming majority of rural parents in Scotland are very satisfied with their local schools. The Scottish Consumer Council's report "Consumer Problems in Rural Areas", published in 1982, showed that nearly nine
out of ten people in rural areas were satisfied or very satisfied with local schools.

Most significantly, recent research carried out by people respected in the education world shows that many of the reasons given for closing schools cannot be justified. Indeed this research shows that there are strong educational and community reasons for keeping village schools open. It gives many examples of practical ways in which the quality of teaching in small schools can be improved at a reasonable cost.

There is, then, a respectable case, backed by objective research, for having a positive policy in favour of small rural schools. Support for rural schools is not simply confined to "cranky rural types" and "vociferous parents" though thank goodness they exist! It is shared by worthy and reputable academics, administrators, teachers and researchers.
Why it is important to make a positive case for rural schools

It is important that this positive case for small rural schools should be put as effectively as possible, and that this case is made not simply where and when a proposal is made to close a rural school. It is all too easy for rural communities to be thought of as negative because they are against school closures and against changes.

If rural schools are to survive and thrive, and meet the needs of the children and the communities they serve, they must be encouraged to change, adapt, experiment and improve. This is best done where a clear policy in favour of rural schools exists and is supported by the education authority, teachers and parents.

Finally, if you are already involved in making the case for rural schools in general, you are much better placed to argue your case should your own or a neighbouring school be threatened.
THE CASE FOR SMALL RURAL SCHOOLS

Educational Reasons

The strongest reason for keeping rural schools open is the educational one. Most local people support their local school because they know that their children are happy there and learn well. Class sizes are small, so there is room for individual attention from teachers. There is considerable flexibility in how school work and the school day can be organised.

There is scope for different sorts of teaching, including group work (with older children sometimes helping younger), and individual study.

Contact between parents and teachers is usually informal, easy and frequent. Rural parents feel informed and involved in what happens at their local school, often more so than in towns and cities.

As far as academic performance is concerned, there is no clear cut evidence that pupils perform better or worse in small schools than in large ones. But
there is plenty of evidence that education in small schools is just as good as in large schools. Moreover a recent report from Aberdeen University has intriguingly revealed that pupils from small rural primary schools actually adapt to secondary schools better than their counterparts who went to larger primary schools.

There is also a strong body of research which shows that parent involvement in and support for the child's school is an important factor in how well that child performs in school. If parental involvement is reduced by a local school being closed and children being taught at a much greater distance, then the academic performance of children is likely to suffer.

However, on the other side of the coin, there are sometimes sound educational reasons for schools to close. Some small rural schools are bad schools, just as some town and city schools are bad schools. The premises may be like slums, with abysmal toilets. There may be too
few pupils to make up proper classes, or sufficient social contact. However opinions vary widely on "how many" is "too few" for a school (below 10, or below 20, or what?).

Most crucially, the teaching may be mediocre or poor. In a larger school incompetent teachers may be able to be "carried" by their colleagues, and pupils may "only" be directly affected for one year or in one subject. In a small rural school, with only perhaps two or three teaching staff, a poor teacher can be disastrous. Nothing is more likely to speed the decline of a village school than the appointment of or the failure to remove a bad teacher quickly. Rural parents are usually well aware if their local school is bad or inadequate.

This awareness is one of the reasons that not every group of parents or rural community decides to fight a decision to close a local school. Indeed, a significant number of school closures go unchallenged each year. And many parents are happy with the alternative arrangements made by the education
authority, once the school has been closed.

However, one of the advantages of an authority having a formal policy in favour of retaining small schools is that there should be an early warning system for identifying and remedying as early as possible educational weaknesses in rural schools, as well as building on their strengths. Authorities should also take care to recruit high calibre staff for rural schools.

**Financial Reasons**

Rural pupils do cost more to educate than urban pupils. But that is true whether they are taught in local village schools, where the larger number of teachers per pupil means costs are higher, or whether they are expensively transported to distant schools.

Rural communities do cost more to provide with schooling and transport does cost more, but these same communities tend to make far fewer demands on, for example, social work services provided by
the same authority. In particular, rural children make fewer demands on other services – smaller numbers are in care or come before children's panels.

Moreover, closing rural schools does not necessarily save the authority money. If considerable building work is required to expand other schools, or children have to be bussed far away, there may be no savings at all. On the other hand, if there is a half-empty school with spare teaching capacity nearby, the savings could be considerable.

When a closure is planned, it is therefore important for parents to get hold of the authority's proposals, and all the background papers on which these are based, to make sure that all the options have been properly costed. These are available to members of the public and councillors, under the Local Government (Access to Information) Act 1985.

**Community Reasons**

There are often strong advantages for the whole community to having a local school.
A school helps to attract and to keep young families with children in the area. It is also important in helping local employers to recruit and retain staff. This is essential if rural communities are to remain active and prosperous.

Teachers themselves have skills to contribute to the community, and the school building is frequently the focal point for local activities.

A school brings people together for different purposes - for work, to pick up children and meet friends, for social activities.

To lose a school is a serious blow to the whole community, not just to the teachers, the pupils and their parents.

**Bussing**

The final reason for parents to make the case for small rural schools staying open is bussing. This is one of the main sources of anxiety for rural parents. In scattered communities there will always be the need for some form of school transport.
But when village schools close, the problems mount. Then children from outlying areas are brought into the village, where they get onto a larger bus to go to a more distant school. Indeed, some four and a half year old children can have a longer "working day" than many adults.

There is, frequently uncertainty about who is responsible for supervising behaviour on school buses. All too often, nobody is responsible in practice. Bus drivers are in a very difficult position - for example they cannot simply eject an unruly 13 year old in the middle of the countryside.

Unless there are proper arrangements for supervising bus journeys, parents are in a very strong position to reject the introduction or extension of bussing for their children.

Moreover, pupils may also be harmed by being bussed to a more distant school when they used to be able to walk. Primary school children are known to suffer from stress caused by long bus journeys.
Parents already know this, and research now backs them up. Indeed, the Aberdeen University research shows that as many as one child in three suffers some form of "trauma" through bussing. Young children are particularly worried about becoming ill a long way from home. They are also frequently terrified by the riotous behaviour and the bullying of some secondary school pupils that can take place on long unsupervised bus journeys.
HOW TO STRENGTHEN RURAL SCHOOLS

- if your education authority has a policy in favour of rural schools, it has a much better chance of attracting and retaining high calibre teachers who are committed to teaching in them. Where no formal policy exists (which is usually called "every case is decided on its merits") rural schools will sometimes be allowed to stay open until the headteacher retires, at which time the authority proposes to close them.

- Teachers, no matter how good they are, need opportunities to attend courses (or "in service training") to keep themselves up-to-date and to broaden their range of skills. They also need to have another teacher fill in for them in their absence, and this is sometimes difficult in small and remote schools.

- However wide the experience and qualifications of teachers, it is
rare in a school with two or three teachers, let alone one teacher, for staff to be able to teach everything themselves. So there is a strong case for "peripatetic" teachers — or possibly part-time people with skills to be brought in to teach music, art, computing, physical education, French or whatever is needed. Indeed, some authorities encourage local people with particular skills to come into schools to pass these on. This not only provides teachers with valuable help but can also give pupils a greater sense of local identity.

Small rural schools frequently lack specialist equipment and materials, because it is too dear to provide every school with a full set. This can be got round in several ways. The specialist equipment for crafts, science or remedial work can be put into a mobile classroom — a minibus or caravan — and be taken round to all the schools in an area. Or groups of small schools can get together and buy 15.
expensive goods jointly and share the use of them. A minibus is particularly useful to have, since it enables teachers and pupils to travel to other schools to use other bits of shared equipment. Sharing avoids the high costs of every school having expensive materials. It also gives rural pupils access to the latest equipment.

Education authorities can help to encourage this pooling of resources by giving a member of staff special responsibility to develop this, and the other steps mentioned above.

 Authorities may wish to formalise the co-operation between country primary schools, and provide a better career structure for teachers by setting up "cluster schools".

This scheme originated in Cambridgeshire but has spread elsewhere in England. Here, a number of rural schools are grouped together under one headteacher,
who is based at a central school within the area. The individual schools are kept open for local children, who have access to all the special equipment and specialist teachers within the group. Cluster schools can sometimes provide better quality education more economically than individual schools. They also keep schools open.

This approach might not be feasible in the most sparsely populated parts of Scotland, but it could work in other rural areas.

HOW YOU CAN MAKE THE CASE FOR RURAL SCHOOLS

Get together with friends and neighbours and organise a parents' group or school support group in your local area. You do not need to do this from scratch. Approach your local community council or council of social service for help. Going further afield, you should contact the Scottish Parent Teacher Council. SPTC is in regular contact with around 500 parent-teacher associations in Scotland, and has an excellent range of pamphlets
telling you how to get started and how to organise yourselves. It will also be able to tell you if there is a federation of parents associations or of parent members of school councils in your area. SPTC will also be able to tell you about other helpful organisations and individuals you can contact for information and advice.

There are a number of college and university lecturers who have made a special study of rural schools, or how parents can become involved in their children's education. Although they are busy people they are often very pleased to give freely of their time and advice. You should be clear what you would like them to do before inviting them to speak at a meeting or to advise your committee. If you are trying to influence the education policy of your regional or islands council, it is sensible to get together with similar groups, possibly in federations, and work together as closely as possible.

But do not worry if you seem to be the only group really interested in the future
of rural schools. There are other people out there who share your concern. They are just waiting for somebody else to take the lead. And that somebody is you.

Homework for Parents

Before you launch any group or any campaign, you have to do your homework. What are the local problems? What is the education authority doing about them? What do local councillors, teachers and parents think? Are people actually discussing the problems? Might there be solutions in your area that nobody has thought of?

Local newspapers are usually well informed about the education authority in their area (after all, it is part of their job!). Contact the journalist who usually writes about school issues, and arrange an informal meeting. They can usually tell you what is going in on the council both in public and in private, and what decisions are coming up. Find out, if you do not know already, who are likely to be the most sympathetic and helpful councillors and officials. And get advice
on what issues or tactics might be newsworthy if you take them up.

Go to the education authority and read minutes of past meetings. Under the Local Government (Access to Information) Act, increasing numbers of background papers are available for public inspection. Ask to see these on relevant subjects, such as guidelines for closing schools. Make informal contact with officials and councillors who are prepared to listen.

Your own local councillor is likely to be sympathetic, if, as you must make sure, your group is representative of local parents and you intend to work responsibly.

Only when you have done all your homework, should you and your local colleagues start to decide on your objectives. You may start with a very general aim, of course, such as to promote and protect village schools. But you cannot set specific objectives until you are very clear what your council's policy is. Some Scottish authorities already have very positive
policies, while others do not have any clearly stated policy; or do not appear to have one, but from time to time propose the closure of particular schools.

But they're trying to close our school!

Sometimes your objective is defined for you. A proposal emerges to close a particular school. Or an authority announces that it has certain financial savings to make, and it lists several options for closing different schools. Usually, if the authority is wise, it will attempt to argue the need for closures on educational grounds, not just because it wants to save money.

The law says that education authorities must consult the local school council and parents who will be affected, when they propose to close a school. Parents who will be "affected" means not only those with children at the school to be closed. It also means parents of children who have not yet started there, and parents of children at other schools to which the children will be sent if the closure goes ahead. The authority also has to consult
other people affected by the change, such as school staff and local employers.

Try to get all of them involved in a local meeting set up to discuss the proposal. Parents should be told in writing about the proposal to close down a school, which gives some information, and tells you where to get more details. You should be given a full written explanation of the reasons for the proposed changes, dates when the closure is intended to take place, and proposed transport arrangements. You should also be told where you can get further details from. The information should also give you an address to which you can send your views on the proposal, and/or the date, time and place of a meeting at which the proposals will be explained and at which parents can ask questions.

The education authority must give you at least 28 days to send in your written comments. Make sure you are given at least that, and press for longer if necessary - for example if it is a holiday period. You must be given at least 14 days notice of any public meeting called

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by the education authority. This must be
out with normal working hours and be within
easy reach for parents. Again, press for
longer notice if necessary.
Normally, an education authority has the
final say in whether or not to close a
school. However, the decision must be
taken by the full council, and not just
the education committee, so it is worth "lobbying" every councillor. This means
contacting them personally at the council
offices, at a regular "surgery", or at
home to present your case to them
personally. (Local authorities are
required to provide a list of all their
elected representatives, with their home
addresses, to enquirers. They also
provide information about when particular
committees and sub-committees take place.)

However, if a proposed school closure,
would mean primary pupils having to travel
five or more miles or secondary pupils
having to travel ten or more miles to a
different school by the nearest available
route, then the Secretary of State for
Scotland has the final say. This is also
the case where a denominational school is
involved.

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However, if it is a denominational school which is under threat and children may have to attend a non-denominational school, the Secretary of State for Scotland has the final say.

If either of these conditions apply to your local school, then it is your job to persuade the Scottish Office as well as the local education authority.

In all other cases, however, the authority's decision is final, unless it has failed to observe the correct legal procedures, which is unlikely. However, if you think it has done that, you can challenge the decision in the Court of Session under a new system called "judicial review". Take legal advice, if you think you may have a case.

What should parents say to the educational authority?

You should examine the proposals carefully. If you think you agree with them, then of course, you should say so. Even if you think the closure is inevitable or even desirable, you should
examine the proposed alternative arrangements very carefully to see how workable or convenient they are. You can argue for these to be improved before you will agree to them. The authority may be very willing to consider making reasonable concessions on these, if this means parents will agree to closure without a battle. Closures frequently are accepted by parents for a variety of reasons, but if you do not ask for anything more, you are unlikely to get anything more.

Things you could press for, along with parents at the other school to which your children will be going, are:

a satisfactory transport arrangements
b more teachers per pupil
c more books and other materials, and a wider range of subjects
d improved building and equipment
e more involvement by parents in the running of the school

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On the other hand, you might decide to resist the proposals. If that is so, then you must be prepared to work hard to prepare your case — especially if you are starting from scratch and do not already have a local parents' group.

Get hold of specialist advice, through Rural Forum or the Scottish Parent Teacher Council. They may be able to put you in touch with education, law, accountancy, publicity or a number of other relevant areas of activity.

Get as much information as possible about the proposals, including the estimated costs and expenditure. Work out whether or not the alternatives proposed really will save money to the extent that is claimed, and really will provide as good an education or better.

Highlight any problems that you foresee, such as bussing pupils, or the loss of the school as a community centre. Best of all, come forward if you can with alternative proposals, properly worked out and costed, based on some of the ideas mentioned earlier. To do this you will
probably need professional advice, since many of the issues are very complicated.

**Role of School Councils**

You may find that the local school council is involved in discussing the proposed closure, and in reporting the views of parents to the authority. Although these are statutory bodies, school councils differ from area to area in how they are set up and what jobs they do. Usually there is a school council for a group of schools, normally for each secondary school and its local primary schools. However some primary schools have a school council of their own. They do have many parent members, and so are a good channel for local parents' groups to make their views shown. However, school councils never take decisions on school closures. Find out all you can about your local school council through the education authority. Your local school's handbook must contain information about the school council. In particular, make contact with your local parent representative on the school council.
CAMPAIGNING

Whether you are campaigning to promote a general policy in favour of rural schools, or to save one local school, there are certain general rules.

Decide your group's objectives. Make sure that these are achievable, and that some are reasonably short term - for example organise a public meeting in two weeks' time. Be clear who you are trying to persuade to do what.

Do your research. If you do not know what you are talking about you will get shot down - and rightly so. Take advice - from outside education experts, fellow campaigners, journalists, teachers, politicians, whoever can give it. The head teacher of the school threatened with closure is usually the best person to start with. People who know a lot about something usually like to give freely of their knowledge - as long as the people asking have done their basic groundwork and know what they are after.
Form alliances – with other parent groups facing similar problems, with teachers, local employers and other community organisations.

Use publicity – the local press and radio will be interested in what you have to say, since your activities will generate local interest. You do not need to be gimmicky, but a campaign slogan and a "logo" or symbol can be useful. Give your campaign or your group a positive and easily remembered name – for example "Save our School" and not "Campaign against Rural School Closures". Gentle, ironic humour (not sarcasm) can also help. So can photographs. Find out what the copy deadline is for your local paper, so that you do not deliver stories too late or organise events at the wrong time in the week. If nobody from the press comes to your meeting, have your own short account of the meeting typed up and delivered the following morning.

Give information to the press, keeping it short with the main points in the first paragraph. Press releases should be typed on only on one side of the paper, using
double or treble spacing and, wide margins. Give daytime and evening telephone numbers where you can be contacted. You can send it out in advance and "embargo" it - put a date and a time after which the story can be used. But make sure that your embargo is for a sensible time - it would be pointless for your local weekly not to be able to use the story until the following week. If you are in any doubt, get advice from a journalist before you send it out. Don't use petitions - or not unless you can make them really impressive, like "every parent with a child in the school has signed ..."

Write letters - both to those whom you are trying to influence directly, councillors and officials, and to the press, to keep the public debate going. Do not use standard letters that dozens of people send in. These have little or no impact. Get parents to write their own individual letters, based on information provided by your campaign, but making their own points in their own language. That is much more impressive. Where possible get letters typed.

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Raise money - to buy stationery, stamps, petrol, and to pay for your organisers' telephone bills. Rural communities are normally good at raising money for worthy causes. Groups can learn to enjoy working together making money for the cause. But make sure you know what you want to spend money on first. Set your target. Then enjoy yourself meeting it.

Hold public meetings - but work enormously hard at publicising them, especially if you have an outside speaker. Deliver door to door leaflets, and print and distribute more posters than you could think possible. Do reminders by telephone.

Decide what the objectives of the meeting are and then organise it to meet that end for example, to set up a committee, or to hear everyone's views. Make sure that the chairman and the speakers know exactly what they are meant to do, and that the audience know when they can have their say.

Where appropriate use other peoples' public meetings to get your (polite) views across. At election times, for example,
candidates hold public meetings. Education is an important political issue at parliamentary regional and island council elections. Ask questions.

Avoid self righteousness — just because you know that you are "right" does not mean that everything you think and do is necessarily correct. Nor does it mean your opponent is not equally convinced that they are right. If you were, say, the Director of Education, or Convener of the Education Committee you might well find yourself arguing for closing things down, against your natural inclinations. So might they.

Do not attribute doubtful motives to your opponents. Say what you and your group believe and try to persuade other people to agree with you, but do not express your opinion of why other people take a different view. Your strongest line in criticism should be "I do not understand why Mr. X says that ..." or "I am surprised that Mrs Y says that ...."

Keep a note of what other people say — and quote them back at themselves, if you can.

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It can be very effective. Do not be afraid to dig back into newspaper files to find out if they said something different on the same subject some years previously.

Remember, your job is to persuade people. You have to be interesting to get them to listen to you — and reasonable enough for them to be carried along by your argument. Be positive. You have a strong case, and a right to be heard.
SOME USEFUL CONTACTS:

Scottish Parent Teacher Council, Atholl House, 2 Canning Street, Edinburgh EH3 8EG
SPTC publishes a newspaper for parents, and booklets on various educational topics, including setting up and running and active parent- teacher association.

Advisory Centre for Education, 18 Victoria Park Square, London E2 9PB
ACE publishes a bi-monthly Bulletin information sheets and booklets for parents covering a wide range of issues and changes in legislation in education.

Some useful further reading:

Schools Under Threat: a handbook on closures, by Rick Rodgers, Advisory Centre for Education.

The Rural Community and the Small School, by Diane Forsythe et al, Aberdeen University Press.


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A Positive Approach to Rural Primary Schools, Cambridge Institute of Education.

Scottish Consumer Council
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