PUTTING PUPILS FIRST: SHAPING OUR FUTURE

Western Education and Library Board
Draft Area Plan for Primary Provision

Response to the Consultation by

Rural Community Network

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Background to RCN

Rural Community Network (RCN) is a regional voluntary organisation established in 1991 by local community organisations to articulate the voice of rural communities on issues relating to poverty, disadvantage, equality, social exclusion and community development. Our vision is of vibrant, articulate, inclusive and sustainable rural communities across Northern Ireland contributing to a prosperous, equitable, peaceful and stable society. Our mission is to provide an effective voice for and support to rural communities, particularly those who are most disadvantaged.

RCN has 350 members across Northern Ireland. Its Board is representative of its membership base with more than half of its representatives elected democratically from the community. The remaining representatives are a mix of organisations that provide support or have a sectoral interest within rural communities. RCN’s aims are:

- to empower the voice of rural communities
- to champion excellence in rural community development practice
- to develop civic leadership in rural communities
- to actively work towards an equitable and peaceful society
- to promote the sustainable development of rural communities

Rural communities make up 40% of the population of Northern Ireland.

Rural Poverty

Rural poverty manifests very differently from poverty in urban areas:

- It is not spatially concentrated and is therefore more difficult to identify. Rural poverty is clearly associated with the remote rural regions although obviously not confined to them. Work carried out by the New Policy Institute and published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation found that poverty is higher in the west of Northern Ireland than in the East. For example, in the rural west 24% of people are in poverty as are 23% in the urban west compared with 17% in poverty in both the rural and urban east of Northern Ireland.
- The average gross weekly earnings of people in rural areas in Northern Ireland from 2001 to 2006 was consistently below those living in urban areas, with the lowest rate of growth occurring in ‘less accessible rural’ areas where, according to the local government based definition of rural, 32% of the Northern Ireland population live.
- Rural poverty exists amongst relative affluence.
- People in rural communities are less likely to identify they are in poverty and there is a culture of “making do”.

In 2008-09 in Northern Ireland, of those who earned 50% below the United Kingdom (UK) mean income before housing costs, half (50% of individuals) lived in rural areas, over a quarter in the Belfast metropolitan urban area (27%) and the rest in the urban areas (22%).

54% of households living in rural areas were in fuel poverty.

Our Interest and Expertise
RCN has been interested in the future of rural schools and their contribution to the sustainability of rural communities since the inception of the organisation in 1991.1

RCN, in partnership with the Integrated Education Fund (IEF) and local community partners, engaged in a series of public conversation events between November 2011 and June 2012. These events were designed to:

- Provide parents and communities with information on policy changes in education;
- Explore how changes in policy and funding may impact on local schools;
- Explore the potential for shared solutions to maintain education provision in rural communities.

The events included input from representatives of relevant Education and Library Boards and representatives from the Catholic Council for Maintained Schools as well as teachers, parents and community representatives. Overall a total of 419 people attended the 10 events in Clogher, Ballynahinch, Castlederg, Armagh, Ballymena, Coleraine, Garvagh, Derry, Donaghmore and Belfast.

We have also been involved in meetings and discussions in the past three months with community groups in areas where primary schools have been earmarked for closure or a local area/parish solution. We have worked to support communities to discuss the implications of the Area Plans for their area and to encourage groups and schools to think about creative responses to try to re-shape and retain educational provision within rural communities. Our response to the WELB Strategic Area Plan is informed by this work.

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1 ‘Small Rural Schools in Northern Ireland’ Available at: [http://www.ruralcommunitynetwork.org/DatabaseDocs/doc_527305124.pdf](http://www.ruralcommunitynetwork.org/DatabaseDocs/doc_527305124.pdf)
3 ‘Small Rural Primary Schools’ Available at: [http://www.ruralcommunitynetwork.org/DatabaseDocs/doc_1241480774.pdf](http://www.ruralcommunitynetwork.org/DatabaseDocs/doc_1241480774.pdf)
Response to the Consultation

RCN welcomes the opportunity to respond to the WELB Draft Area Plan for Primary Schools consultation. As RCN is a regional community development organisation, we will make some general points on the Area Plan rather than responding in detail through the consultation questionnaire.

Challenging Assumptions Underpinning Area Planning

RCN does not accept that the financial argument for closing rural schools has been conclusively made. Almost 80% of the cost of education attaches to the individual pupil. Closing schools in rural areas will inevitably lead to additional transport costs, and there may be additional capital costs if neighbouring schools need renovations or expansion to cope with higher numbers.

The assumption that only larger schools can deliver a quality education is, in our view, open to question. Research by the University of Ulster has shown that there is no direct correlation between school size and the attainment of pupils:

“It is immediately obvious that the size of the school and its budgetary status are not significant when it comes to educational attainment.”

The effects of composite classes (where children of different age groups are taught in the one room, common practice in smaller rural schools in Northern Ireland) on pupil attainment is assumed by the Department to be negative i.e. children don’t achieve as well in composite classes. However a review of international research on the effects of composite classes carried out by the University of Glasgow in 2003 didn’t indicate any significant ill effects on pupil attainment. In some studies evidence has shown that composite classes can have a positive effect on peer group interaction.

The Area Planning Process

Area Based Planning will impact on all primary schools as even schools which are viable will be forced to accommodate pupils who will transfer from other schools which are closing. One of the flaws with the current approach to Area Planning is that only those schools earmarked for closure or a local area/parish solution will react. RCN believes that it is critically important that parents, all local primary schools and the whole community are involved in planning for primary school education in their area. RCN’s previous experience of the involvement of parents and the wider community in debates around education

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4 Shuffling Desks or Improving Education Performance? Area Planning in Northern Ireland June 2013 Vani K. Borooah and Colin Knox University of Ulster unpublished paper available from the authors

5 All In Together; An Overview of the Literature on Composite Classes Wilson V. 2003 available at http://dspace.gla.ac.uk:8080/bitstream/1905/171/1/113.pdf
usually revolves around school closures or amalgamations and at a stage when these decisions have already been made. In enhancing public engagement we believe that it is important that people are informed every step of the way to enable local area/parish solutions to be arrived at that command the maximum public support.

RCN is concerned that the format of this consultation with a large document being placed online with little evidence of public engagement by WELB, CCMS or the Department of Education will result in a low level of public engagement in this crucial debate. We believe that there needs to be a more pro-active approach towards the consultation process. The only method of seeking views and making a response to the Area Plans is through an online questionnaire. This overlooks the fact that many households have still no access to the internet. In the WELB area an average of 61% of households have access to broadband. This online consultation will exclude nearly 40% of households who will be much less likely to respond if they have to seek out the consultation through libraries or other public access terminals. RCN recommends that the Department, the Education and Library Boards and CCMS work to ensure effective participatory community consultation in future Area Planning exercises so that stakeholders have the information to engage in an informed debate on the future of schools in their areas.

Throughout the Area Based Plan the WELB has adopted the current Local Government District area to present information in relation to the future of primary schools. Whilst this is a specific administrative boundary, in RCN’s view, a council area is too large an area for communities to relate to especially when considering the future of primary education. RCN recommends that information in future Primary Area Plans needs to be based on smaller local areas as families select primary schools from a much smaller catchment area than across a whole council. We acknowledge there has been a level of under-resourcing of Education and Library Boards in anticipation of the introduction of the Education and Skills Authority, however, public consultation on Area Based Planning must be resourced by the Department and undertaken by Education and Library Boards and CCMS if the Department is serious about building a community consensus for the re-organisation of our education system that will deliver quality education on an equitable basis to all our children and young people.

A Twin Track process

RCN is concerned that the Education and Library Boards and CCMS have embarked on a twin track process that implements Area Planning within the controlled and maintained sectors separately. This twin track process means that shared education options are less likely to emerge from communities. Primary schools from both controlled and maintained sectors that may have been viable on a shared basis are more likely to close leading to further

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6 See OFCOM figures on broadband takeup available at http://maps.ofcom.org.uk/broadband/
segregation within the education system and longer travelling distances for children from rural communities. There is little evidence in the Area Plan of both the Board and CCMS using an agreed approach to developing local area/parish solutions making it difficult for schools who are trying to explore cross-sectoral solutions.

A Lack of Guidance for Schools and Communities
RCN is concerned that schools and communities have had to develop local area solutions in a vacuum with very little guidance or input from either Education and Library Boards or CCMS in a three month timescale. In RCN’s view it is unrealistic to expect innovative and creative local area solutions to emerge in such a short timescale. Whilst we appreciate the intention of the Department and the ELBs may have been to use the Area Planning process to accelerate the rationalization of the schools estate and in some cases this has motivated schools to start to consider local area/parish solutions including shared models, but not enough time has been given to allow considered innovative models which have widespread community support to emerge. The legacy of the conflict and the segregation of communities and schools mean that developing shared solutions will be a time consuming and painstaking process in many areas and Area Planning needs to recognize this reality.

Requirements for Local Area/Parish Solutions to Work
For local area/parish solutions to become a reality schools need:

- Time to build relationships and engage with the wider community to build support for change;
- Clear guidance and a framework from their relevant managing authority as to how to proceed;
- Independent facilitation to work with communities to ensure that any proposed local area/parish solutions receive maximum community support;
- A guarantee that where a local area/parish solution is reached (especially in the case of a cross-sectoral solution) they will be supported financially for a fixed number of years to allow the new arrangements to bed down and for the local community to come to terms with the new arrangements.

Learning from Good Practice
We can see that from the WELB Area Plan there are several examples of shared education and examples of amalgamation within sectors and we welcome these approaches across the WELB area subject to local community engagement and support. RCN recommend that the WELB use the learning from these examples to guide other primary schools in future rounds of Area Planning.
Empty Desks and Approved Enrolment Revision

RCN is disappointed to note that the WELB Area Plan does not make reference to the need to revise the approved enrolment numbers for primary schools. Anecdotally from contacts we have made with primary schools some have said that the approved enrolment number for their school in the Area Plan is based on historic data and the number of empty desks in their school is being overestimated. The NEELB Area Plan recognises this anomaly and the Northern Board is already in the process of revising the approved enrolment numbers for schools in their area:

“the approved enrolment of some schools will also require revision to more accurately reflect the current designation of rooms, and this process has already begun”  

RCN acknowledges the importance of this issue and we recommend that the WELB undertake a similar review as soon as possible to inform future rounds of Area Planning.

Rural White Paper Commitments

The Rural White Paper Action Plan published by the NI Executive in 2012 states:

“We must also strive to keep our rural areas sustainable and ensure that those people who live their lives either through choice or birth rightfully have access to services on an equitable basis and are offered opportunities in terms of accessing education, jobs, healthcare and leisure.”

We support the following commitments made by the Department of Education in the Rural White Paper:

- **Action 28** All children regardless of where they live have access to a broad and balanced curriculum
- **Action 49** We will ensure, through an area based approach to planning that children and young people have access to high quality education delivered through a network of viable and sustainable schools.
- **Action 50** We will engage with key stakeholders in the development of education provision on an area basis.
- **Action 51** We will explore innovative and creative solutions to the delivery of education provision in rural areas through the area based planning approach.

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7 See Draft Area Plan for North Eastern Education and Library Board: http://www.SELB.org.uk/schools/consultation/primary-area-planning/draft/
However it is our view that the Department of Education has failed to live up to these commitments in this round of Area Planning. We would urge the Department to re-think its approach to Area Planning and apply the lessons learnt from this round of Area Planning in the future.

**Rural Proofing**

RCN sees rural proofing as being the process by which all major policies and strategies are assessed to determine whether they have a differential impact on rural areas and, where appropriate, adjustments are made to take account of particular rural circumstances. RCN is disappointed to note that the WELB Area Plan makes no reference to rural proofing. Evidence is provided in the Area Plan regarding enrolment numbers, numbers of teachers etc. but there is no statement within the Area Plan that sets out how it will impact rural areas and it fails to identify how the implementation of the “plans” will be monitored to ensure education services delivered to rural communities are equitable.

RCN welcomes the recognition within the WELB Area Plan at Para 2.1.3 that the Primary School provides a pivotal role within the local community. RCN also welcomes the commitment within the Area Plan that where a school has been identified as unsustainable the Board will investigate every local area solution to secure the provision and that the WELB will focus on the retention of rural schools.

RCN recommends that the WELB undertake a robust rural proofing of the Area Plans that emerge from the consultation process.

**The Definition of Rural Schools**

The Sustainable Schools Policy defines urban schools as those located within the urban areas of Belfast and Derry City Council areas and everywhere else outside these areas as rural. This contradicts the definition of “rural” developed in 2005 by the Inter-Departmental Urban Rural Definition Group which classified settlements with a population of 4,500 or less as rural\(^9\). There are a significant number of schools within urban settlements outside of Belfast and Derry that are considered as rural by DENI but are not considered rural when measured against the 4,500 population definition. In our view it is inconsistent and unfair for the Department and ELBs to use an enrolment threshold of 105 for a primary school in Newtownards and use the same enrolment figure for a primary school in rural Fermanagh.

**Wider Context of the Removal of Rural Services**

Rural schools play a significant role in rural communities. As well as places of learning, they offer an important focus in rural areas acting as a community hub and provide employment for teachers and ancillary staff. Potential school closures need to be seen in the context of a long standing trend of the withdrawal of services and investment in rural communities such as post offices, pubs, shops and banks and the Area Based Planning process needs to acknowledge this. The closure of rural schools runs counter to the work of other Government Departments that are investing in rural communities to ensure their long term sustainability.

**Effects on Travel Time on Pupils in Rural Communities**

RCN recommends that the Department and the WELB clearly sets out and considers the impact of potential school closures or local area solutions on travelling time for pupils in rural areas. The Department of Education’s Sustainable Schools Policy in relation to the Accessibility criteria sets out an indicator on travel time which recommends a maximum travel time to school for primary school children as thirty minutes each way and one hour in total during the school day. RCN recommends that this additional information is included in future rounds of Area Based Planning for primary schools when either closures or local area/parish solutions are being considered.\(^\text{10}\)

\(^{10}\text{Sustainable Schools Policy, available at: }\)http://www.deni.gov.uk/a_policy_for_sustainable_schools-2.pdf