



Jim Knight MP

Minister of State for Schools and Learners

Sanctuary Buildings Great Smith Street Westminster London SW1P 3BT
tel: 0870 0012345 dcsf.ministers@dcsf.gsi.gov.uk

All Directors of Children's Services in England

31 January 2008

I am writing to set out the Government's policy on rural school closures following recent suggestions in the national press that the Government might be changing its position. There has been no change in policy.

There is no question of the Government drawing back from its firm commitment to rural schools. Before the presumption against closing rural schools was introduced in 1998, 30 rural schools closed on average per year: since then that figure has been reduced to seven. We recognise that rural primary schools are an important part of the rural landscape and an important factor in keeping rural communities alive.

Presumption against closing rural schools

The presumption against closing rural schools which we introduced in 1998 is unchanged. We have designated those schools to which the presumption applies: the list is available at www.dfes.gov.uk/publications/otherdocs.shtml.

Our statutory guidance states that the decision maker, which is usually the local authority, must have regard to the presumption and also take account of several other factors when considering proposals to close a rural school.

These include transport availability and cost, alternatives to closure and the impact on the community. Authorities will also want to take school performance into account, as our policy is that local authorities should support popular and successful schools.

Before preparing proposals to close a primary school, authorities need to check our guidance as statutory consultation arrangements apply for rural schools. The Education and Inspections Act 2006 requires those proposing to close a rural primary school to consult parents of pupils registered at the school; the district council for the area in which the school is situated; any parish council for the area in which the school is situated, if the local authority is a county council; and any other relevant person(s).

It is not our intention that no rural school should ever close, but the case for closure needs to be strong and clearly in the best interests of educational provision in the area. For example, closure can be justified when all the parties agree, or when an alternative school can offer superior facilities within an acceptable travel distance.

We know that primary pupil numbers have fallen since 1999 and are projected to fall up to 2009, and there has been a 10% fall since 1999. This is due to demographic shift and a declining birth rate and the numbers are projected to rise again from 2009. Authorities must review the needs of their population regularly taking account of projected changes in their area. I recognise that we have asked authorities to manage excessive surplus places but this does not automatically mean closing schools. We encourage authorities to look at other options available to them and their schools, for example by promoting shared governance arrangements between small primary schools as a way of addressing financial and educational challenges resulting from falling primary school rolls. Federated schools may have a single head teacher, greater flexibility in use of staff and other resources, and scope to reduce administrative costs while remaining open on separate sites.

We also encourage authorities to look at rationalising school space. This might involve removing temporary accommodation or broadening the services their schools offer in line with the likely future pattern of children's services and the needs of local communities. The Children's Plan emphasises that we would like to see more co-location of children's services, so we would like to see local authorities think creatively about how that can be achieved.

Nationally, total revenue funding for schools has increased by £1,820 per pupil in real terms over the last decade. The settlement for the next three years will see per pupil funding rise to £4,930 in real terms in 2010-11, an increase of 77% since 1997-98.

The Government accepts that rural authorities will need to maintain smaller primary schools on average than other authorities, and this is reflected in the funding formula which underlies the Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG). We calculate that DSG in 2007-08 contains £188m funding for the extra costs of primary schools which arise due to sparsity of population.

We think it right that funding should follow pupils so that schools where the roll is rising see an increase in their budgets. But the settlement for the next three years includes an element of protection against falling rolls at local authority level through a 2% minimum cash increase each year. And local authorities can build a cushion for schools with rapidly falling pupil numbers into their local funding formula, recognising that schools have fixed costs such as heating, cleaning and repairs that do not go down when they have fewer pupils.

Primary Capital Programme

The Primary Capital Programme offers local authorities an ideal opportunity to replace 5% of school buildings in the worst physical condition. It also offers authorities the opportunity to reorganise primary provision and ensure that primary school provision reflects local demand.

In doing so authorities may wish to consider new models for reorganisation, including more collaborative working through federations and trust schools, as well as amalgamation and rationalisation to maximise the availability of good school places. We recognise that it will not always be practicable, or desirable, to remove all surplus places. Authorities should allow for parental choice, accessibility of schools and possible future increases in pupil numbers due to demographic changes. We accept that, in order to preserve access for

young children, there may be more empty places in schools in rural areas than in urban areas.

Yours

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Jim Knight". The signature is stylized with a large initial "J" and a long, sweeping underline that extends to the right.

Jim Knight MP