

New code sets out presumption against rural school closures

The Welsh Government is changing the School Organisation Code that guides decisions about schools.

The Education Secretary has launched a consultation on the changes, which include:

- Proposers having to consider whether a rural school will be closed by referring to a 'rural school' list
- Proposals to close a rural school must identify clear and specific reasons for closure, set out the alternatives that have been identified, with an assessment of these including likely education benefits, impact on the community and the likely effect on travelling arrangements and explain why the closure is the most appropriate course of action.
- Federation to be considered as an alternative in all cases.
- Consideration of alternatives to be a two-stage process with the proposer having to consider other alternatives that emerge during the consultation process.
- Any consultations on closures to be published on a school day and the local community made aware.
- The code will be revised to better reflect that addressing surplus places does not necessarily mean closing schools and alternatives to closure should be considered.

Kirsty Williams has also announced that the Welsh Government will establish the first ever designation of rural schools and develop a list of rural schools for the purposes of the presumption against closure of rural schools.

Kirsty Williams said:

“Rural schools face unique issues and I want to ensure that pupils that attend them have the same opportunities as children in other areas.

“These proposals strengthen the School Organisation Code to make sure that councils and other proposers do everything they can to keep a rural school open before deciding to consult on closure.

“Talking and engaging with the local community is vital. If there is a consultation to close a school, all options and suggestions that emerge from this must be considered before a decision is made. This might include federation with other schools or increasing the community use of school buildings to make the school more viable.

“Rural schools are at the heart of community life. I therefore want to make sure these schools get a fair hearing when their future is being considered. These plans will play a key part in our national

mission to raise standards and offer opportunities to all our young people.”

Last year Kirsty Williams announced a new £2.5m a year small and rural schools grant to encourage innovation and support school to school working Councils submitted their proposals to the Welsh Government at the end of May and these are currently being assessed.