

New code to support rural schools comes into force

The School Organisation Code has been revised to include a more detailed set of procedures and requirements that local authorities and other proposers must follow when putting together proposals to close a rural school.

For this purpose, the Code includes a designation of a rural school, based on The National Statistics Urban Rural Classification.

A list of schools in Wales that come under this designation is included in the Code.

In future, local authorities and other proposers will need to check whether a school is on the list and the further procedures and requirements apply. However, the presumption against closure is not retrospective, and doesn't apply to proposals that are already in progress including those where the consultation has been published.

A presumption against closure does not mean that rural schools will never close, however, it does mean that the case for closure must be strong and not taken until all viable alternatives to closure have been explored, including linking up with other schools under one governing body – otherwise known as federation.

The strengthened School Organisation Code forms part of a wider Rural Education Plan which also includes a Small and Rural Schools Grant that has already benefited over 370 schools in all local authority areas across Wales.

The Grant, which totals £2.5m a year for the lifetime of this Assembly aims to encourage innovation including the use of digital technology to combat the issue of professional isolation, and provides additional administrative support in schools where the headteacher has a significant teaching commitment.

The Grant also supports collaboration and federation with other schools – and where opportunities exist and there is local demand, the use of school facilities for community purposes.

Kirsty Williams said:

“Rural schools are at the heart of community life and key to our National Mission for Education. I want to make sure that we're supporting pupils and teachers in rural areas and that all our young people, no matter where they live, receive the very best education.

“That's why we have acted to strengthen the School Organisation Code, ensuring that councils and other proposers do everything they

can to keep a rural school open before deciding to consult on closure.

“This doesn’t mean a rural school will never close but it does mean that all options and suggestions are on the table 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.

“This is of course just one part of our Rural Education Action Plan which is already making a big difference through the Small and Rural School grant and the E-sgol project which aims to bring all schools in Wales into the digital age by introducing innovative teaching techniques.”