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14<sup>th</sup> November 2012

Dear Sir/Madam,

### **Committee Stage of the Education Bill**

The Ulster Farmers' Union (UFU) is the largest farming organisation in Northern Ireland representing nearly 12,000 farming families. As such, we welcome the opportunity to provide our views on the above consultation.

Any Education and Skills Authority (ESA) must properly cater for the needs of rural schools by having sufficient rural representation at all levels within an ESA. Any ESA must help deliver all objectives of the NI Executive's Rural White Paper

The importance of rural schools must be recognised as rural schools are very often the heart of many communities. They play a vital role in developing communities, and shaping the lives of rural children. Many rural schools tend to be smaller, which build closer relationships and familiarity with pupils enabling easier recognition of needs and the potential work with parents to address them. Smaller schools also mean smaller classes, a policy which parents sending their children to private schools pay for! Some reports have suggested that small schools get better results and there is an enormous long-term significance in the worth of keeping education close to home, enriched by access to the local neighbourhood. Small rural schools give children a great sense of identity, make them part of the local ethos and represent an option that is for the greater good of rural children. Indeed, without access to local schools, rural children are likely to have greater travel and transport issues. This in turn impacts on the health and wellbeing of that young person. Rural children should not be denied a quality education because they live in a rural area.

The local rural school is much more than just bricks and mortar; it can have many functions, if its potential is used to the full. In many areas, the school is the heart of the community and can act as a focal point for the development and attractiveness of an area. It has long been recognised that school buildings represent a potential community resource, and should undoubtedly be used through the summer months and evenings. The UFU support the shared education, extended and federated schools concept as we feel that this could be a means of supporting the long term sustainability of many rural schools and strengthen links to the local rural community.

Most school viability tests are looked at purely on analysis of enrolment trends but this needs to be applied with caution when considering rural schools. Any decline in pupil numbers has an automatic effect on school budgets and small rural schools are more likely to experience such fluctuations. A schools projected enrolment must be taken into consideration and all alternatives to school closure must be explored.

The UFU seek to ensure that we create a vibrant rural countryside, and encourage our families and children to remain in the rural area in which they were raised. This is also highlighted in the NI Executive's Rural White paper. It is vital that an evaluation process takes place about the loss of the local community a school closure will make.

As the Sustainable Schools policy stated, NI has a higher proportion of small schools than the rest of the UK, and the vast majority of these small schools are located in rural areas, making these schools more expensive to run. If a school is meeting a communities need, the children deserve the same access to capital expenditure as any other school, and such rural children should not be disadvantaged because of this. The needs of the children must be paramount, and if a rural school is meeting the needs of a community such a school should be retained and encouraged to further develop.

The UFU would like to highlight the Schools Bill that is being progressed in Scotland. The Scottish legislation introduces a presumption against the closure of rural schools- not to prevent any or all such closures in future, but to seek to ensure that a closure decision is only taken as a last resort and not until all the alternatives have been explored and the potential impact on the community fully considered. The overarching objective of the Scottish Bill is to update and strengthen the consultation practices and procedures applied to all school closures and other proposals through a three-fold system-

- To establish a consultation process for all school closures and other proposals affecting schools that is coherent, easy to understand, fair, workable, open and transparent and above all which commands the trust and confidence of the public.
- To safeguard rural schools by exploring all possible alternatives and assessing the likely implications of closure.
- To replace their current system for referring certain local authority decisions for Ministerial consent with a new system of 'call-in'.

The UFU feel that this is a pragmatic approach and could help safeguard small fragile economies. The problem in Northern Ireland is that each decision is taken in the absence of any consideration of their overall effect and this is nowhere more true than in the case of a school.

Any establishment of an ESA must recognise the importance of rural schools and ensure that there is adequate provision to be able to meet the needs of the rural area and help create vibrant rural communities. The needs of all children must be given priority, and NI must continue to educate young people to the highest possible standard providing equality and easy access for all.

I trust these comments will be fully considered.

Yours faithfully,



Ruth Irvine

Rural Affairs Committee Chair