CABINET SECRETARY’S ANNOUNCEMENT ON RURAL SCHOOLS

Purpose

1. The purpose of this report is to provide members with an update on the Cabinet Secretary for Education, Kirsty Williams AM’s recent announcement on rural schools.

Background

2. As a key part of the progressive agreement between Kirsty Williams AM and Welsh Labour, the Cabinet Secretary made a commitment to support rural schools in Wales. She made specific reference to reviewing the impact of current policy on surplus school places, with an emphasis on rural schools, in order to take better account of future growth trends.

3. The Welsh Government’s current policy on the issue of surplus school places is contained in the School Standards and Organisation (Wales) Act 2013 and the subsequent School Organisation Code. The need to reduce the number of surplus school places in the system was reaffirmed in letters to local authorities on the issue by the previous two education Ministers.

4. The School Organisation Code states that the primary factor for local authorities to consider when looking at school reorganisation and closures are the educational outcomes for children and young people, with the second most important factor being the statutory duty of the local authority to ensure the sufficiency of school places. The Code also specifically states that “there is no presumption in favour or against the closure of any type of school”. This differs from the guidance from the Department for Education in England where there is a presumption against the closures of rural schools.

5. All local authorities were asked to reduce surplus places in the system and many local authorities have made progress in this area. In 2015 16.8% of school places unfilled compared to 18.1% in 2013. There were 19.6% surplus places in the secondary sector and 14.4% in the primary sector, a reduction of 3.2% in the primary sector since 2013. Over 40% of the surplus places in schools were in small schools, which are largely located in rural areas.

6. Many local authorities have looked to reorganise and improve their school estate through the 21st Century Schools programme and this work has begun to address the issue of surplus places in many local authorities. One of the primary aims of Band A of the 21st Century Schools programme has been to reduce surplus capacity in schools.
New Rules on Rural Schools

7. On 15th November the Education Secretary issued a statement setting out a new approach to rural schools and proposed changes to the School Organisation Code. The key proposals are as follows:

- A presumption against the closure of rural schools;
- Cases to close rural schools must be strong;
- Local authorities to carry out more rigorous consultation and conscientiously consider all viable alternatives to closure including linking up with other schools, known as federation.
- The development of a definition of a rural school.
- Funding for the development of federations across all maintained schools and better information and guidance for those considering collaboration and federation.
- Plans to develop school leaders to include proposals to build capacity of experienced, successful leaders of rural schools to deliver effective leadership across groups of rural schools.
- The Welsh Government will also create a new £2.5m per year fund to help schools work together and increase the community use of buildings.

8. The Welsh Government will now hold a consultation on these proposed changes.

Discussions with Education Cabinet Members

9. The Education Secretary Kirsty Williams met local authority Cabinet Members for Education on Friday 11th November and the issue of rural schools was discussed. The Education Secretary indicated that she would be making a statement and some of the relevant issues were discussed but there was no discussion of the presumption against the closure of rural schools.

10. In light of that discussion, local authorities will welcome some elements of the new announcement and proposed consultation. The amendments to the School Organisation Code and the increased emphasis on consultation with local communities and the opportunity to discuss a shared definition of the terms rural school and small school.

11. The announcement to support schools to form federations where appropriate is also positive. The WLGA called for this measure in its Manifesto at the beginning of 2016 and believe it will enable schools to offer a broad curriculum and support financial efficiency. The Cabinet Secretary's announcement for support for leadership in rural schools and the introduction of an addition £2.5
million for rural schools will allow rural schools to develop innovative approaches to the delivery of education in rural areas.

12. The presumption against the closure of rural schools is more problematic and appears to represent a considerable change in policy direction. The WLGA will seek further information from the Welsh Government on this matter so as to provide clarity. The distribution of rural schools across Welsh authorities varies considerably, so the proposed inclusion of a ‘presumption against the closure of rural schools’ in the revised Code will impact on each authority’s approach to school organisation in different ways. The WLGA has stated publicly that it will need to discuss these proposals further with member authorities.

Recommendations

13. Members are asked to note and discuss the content of this report.