

We need more Small Schools - New Vision for Education

A New NASS Booklet

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A gathering cloud of rural school closures threatens still in England with LEAs like Staffordshire and Cheshire proposing wholesale closures of the precise kind the Government said in circular 110/98 it wished to outlaw. Similar large-scale reorganisation threatens to engulf the countryside in both Scotland and Wales as the respective governments refuse the protection afforded in England by "the presumption against closure" introduced by the Blair Government in 1998. The threat in Scotland and Wales is driven by tired old economic arguments that do not stand the test of serious economic analysis. As previously in England those using such out-dated arguments ignore the broader perspectives available. Worse, papers advancing closure proposals are seriously unbalanced, favouring the preferred view that small schools are detrimental to children's best interests. Decision-makers, and many parents, have been wilfully misled. NASS recognises that the message of virtue and potential is influencing the upper reaches of political power, provoking fresh thought and new vision. As recent activity in Wales and Scotland argues, we need to work together and be vigilant.

*Politicians and the professionals who advise them eager to close schools invariably tell parents and local people that the children will in fact be better off in larger schools, especially if new building is involved. They are seriously **WRONG**.*

Fact: *NASS has seen no evidence offered to show that new buildings in any measure improve pupils' performance. NASS knows of one village school whose thatched roof leaked after successive days of rain but brought fresh mathematical opportunity; rates of flow were recorded and compared with previous episodes, along with weather factors! It is teaching that matters.*

Fact: *OFSTED inspection summaries in England show no correlation between class size and educational outcomes.* So what is driving the very evident success of small schools that tend to have smaller teaching groups? NASS recognises the humanity of scale in smallness itself as a driving factor, helping children feel they belong and are known. Education is first a social process. Test and inspection evidence shows small schools do as well as the best of the rest and often better.

Fact: *OFSTED surveys highlight Quality of Teaching as a major factor in small school success, along with quality of leadership. OFSTED reports that these qualities are higher in small schools because of things like the small staff team and the involvement of the head as a teacher, and therefore closely aware of standards of achievement.*

*Educational arguments to close small schools often cite small age groups and mixed ability as professional difficulties and disadvantageous to children. The same politicians will invariably tell small school parents their children will be better off in larger schools because there are more children to mix with of the same age. **WRONG!***

Fact: *Research published in April 2003 showed (yet again) that 50% of what any of us get from education still reflects home background. The other 50% reflects quality of teaching. OFSTED states that the close and practical involvement with home and local community are significant in making smaller schools effective. This well addresses both these 50 % factors that ultimately matter.*

Fact: *The Haringey reading project involving children doing at home what they did with their teachers at schools, creating continuity of experience, showed that such pupils made more progress and more rapidly than others taught normally or given extra teaching.*

Fact: *This work was replicated in Bradford but not every family in the study was able to be involved so older*

pupils were used. Not only were the same outcomes observed for the young readers but *the older pupils also gained significantly* in their own competence. This is very logical given that repetition remains a valuable learning increment and the need to teach rather than learn always involves a different level of understanding that then reinforces the individual's own understanding of it.

Fact: *NASS has seen no evidence offered to justify bundling bodies into classrooms by age to improve educational outcomes.*

Fact: *Small schools have close links with parents and a model of learning and teaching that is much closer to the natural and very effective one found at home. In this model mixed age and ability, given good professional management, becomes strength rather than the alleged deficiency.* It enables the still powerful 'master-apprentice' model of learning to function, the kind wherein at home, for example, grandparents teach children important truths and skills. In their real world children learn very effectively by a wide range of methods, discovery, chance, instruction, repetition, curiosity, alone or in small groups, rarely the same age exclusively. *The small school is rather closer to this multi-faceted version of effective learning.*

Fact: Johnstone's study published in Nisbet and Forsyth's research at Aberdeen University for the old DOE showed the most successful pupils at Scottish 'Highers' to be girls from sparsely populated highland and island regions with boys not far behind and both comfortably ahead of pupils from larger schools and city schools. *Such pupils will have had their primary education in very small schools indeed.*

Fact: A consistently successful local authority at "A" level in Wales has been Ceredigion, the LEA with the most small and very small schools. *If there were anything at all detrimental about education in very small schools it would surely show in these tests at the peak of the system.* Some of the best reports by OFSTED of schools in England have been from schools in remote areas, e.g. The Scillies, with rolls as low as 4 pupils. If there were any evidence that small peer groups in well-run small schools were detrimental to children's educational development OFSTED inspectors would have to report it. *They do not do so.*

Fact: Thousands of children in Australia and Canada have had their entire primary education at home by radio and with parental involvement. NASS knows *no evidence to suggest these children have become some kind of second-class citizen.*

Fact: A teacher who worked in two large junior schools with classes of over 40 reported that, when observing them socially at lunch and break times, found them rarely engaged with groups of other pupils larger than four to six individuals, unless involved in games involving teams. *Smallness of scale is a symptom of effective social relationships.*

Fact: The ever more intensive pressure in England on academic attainment reflects 'A' level pressure. Yet research has shown 'A' level grades *to be a poor indicator* of later performance. Conventional teaching processes badly fit the best evidence from high quality researchers such as Professor Maurice Galton as to what makes learning effective. Rather than an opening process leading to learner autonomy and responsibility it becomes an ever more intensive and dependent system narrowing learning horizons in favour of the examinations. By their nature small schools and their mixed age groups encourage a more effective process.

Fact: The Blair Government is reflecting on the worth of Montessori and Steiner schools because they value the person as well as the mind. Personal, social and moral education is usually well praised in OFSTED reports on small schools whose pupils invariably behave well and have positive attitudes to learning. This has significant long-term economic worth for society.

Fact: Small secondary schools with good teaching also achieve very good reports. A Herefordshire school was praised for the effectiveness of its science lessons, particularly those presented in classes of 60. The 2-pupil secondary school in The Skerries, where the pupils attend only half time anyway and work with their parents on the fishing boats the rest, is a model of potential excellence second to none. The opportunities to create a radically effective curriculum are abundant. *Again quality of teaching will make the difference.* Much depends on the quality of that headteacher, her colleagues, the parents and the community.

Fact: Big US cities like New York, Chicago, San Francisco are *rapidly reorganising their practice to create smallness* within their present very large scale institutions.

Closure proposals often argue that teachers and headteachers, as well as pupils, are too isolated in very small schools and that there are not enough teachers to deliver a viable curriculum. In such

negative perspectives many small schools live permanently under the threat of obligatory review against triggers that include arbitrary definitions of viable size.

Just apart from the evidence cited above that even the smallest well-run schools are as capable as the rest isolation is ever more open to remedy, the more so with modern technology.

Fact: Those few small schools in England that fail inspection usually remedy the situation at the first attempt because for the first time they receive proper support and guidance from the LEA. Where isolation may still be felt other strategies exist. NASS welcomes the emergence in more positive local authorities of rural advisory officers to offset this factor and bring collective focus to rural schools, especially remote areas.

Fact: Clustering brings small schools together much more in collective effort and shared practice. Former HMI in England were at times disappointed at the quality and scope of much cluster activity but identified best practice. Recent Government Standards Funding in England encouraged more collaborative work with local communities and other schools as well as providing more time for headteachers professionally to manage the school by freeing them from administration.

Fact: Three small schools in North Wales were linked by web-cams (£100 each) a few years ago to share teaching and learning opportunities brought by such technology. It augmented what conventional clustering offered. Clearly larger scale will always offer some potential benefits but they are far from exclusive to larger sites.

Fact: Visionary local authorities, and there are several, rejoice in their small schools and work very hard to support and enrich the provision being made whose value they well recognise. For example, Derbyshire and Worcestershire Chief Education Officers both told House of Commons seminars recently that their smaller schools obtained better test results than their larger ones. A study done at Oxford's Institute of Education identified senior officer attitude as the key factor determining the fate of small schools.

Fact: Defining viability by size of roll is utterly arbitrary. There is no evidence to justify any such figure. That it can vary from 25 to 210 shows the lamentable lack of professional understanding within the ranks of those senior education officers advancing such theories. Worcestershire, with its very positive CEO, has approved a review policy based on just one criterion, whether a school can offer three or more teachers. They do NOT have to be full-time. The LEA recognises the overriding importance of professional input to the learning process. Armthwaite First School in Cumbria, just 45 pupils 4 to 9, has worked such principles for some time with a staffing policy under which only the headteacher is full-time and other staff appointed to suit curriculum priorities.

Closure proposals often also argue difficulties in recruitment of headteachers to small rural schools and a trigger for review can be the departure of a headteacher, which can create cruel anguish for many contemplating moving and for the communities they serve who know that in many cases such moves are eventually likely. Such triggers remain a permanent cloud above both school and community.

NASS recognises the symptom but believes it is the absence of adequate professional support, allied to the regular disparaging of small schools in a constant climate of closure, plus the lack of an adequate career structure within rural education, coupled with the ever increasing administrative demands that most deter interest.

NASS does not believe potential headteachers are deterred by the need to teach, even to teach as an assigned class teacher. Were such the case such persons should not be appointed to headteaching posts. Rather it is the growing weight of the administrative demands that conflict with teaching and professional leadership roles, threatening the quality of each, that more truly deters interest.

Fact: Local authorities occasionally offer federation in one form or another as an alternative to closure. Invariably this means tagging a small unit onto a larger one as an annex, largely as it was but sharing the headteacher. NASS has observed the smaller units invariably close a few years later and often this is the LEA's strategy, a slightly longer but often less controversial route to closure. Federations in which two or more schools are completely merged on one site are just amalgamations and in effect de facto closure of the lost schools. New area schools are a creation of larger schools from several smaller school closures.

Fact: Federation was discussed in a radical paper at the LGA conference in London in 2000. The concept involved creating one school on two or more sites but with just one headteacher, one staff team and one governing body. It thus became truly one school, and not a set of virtually independent bodies carrying on as they were when the crisis arrived.

A radical distinction in such arrangements was the long-term guarantees given to local communities regarding

their own school sites. *These were protected long-term from closure.* Jacqui Smith, then Minister for Rural Education, *offered to legislate if this were required to secure such new federation arrangements* but most local authorities have shied away from them because the unviability/closure mentality remains so strong and alternative priorities dissuade the effort.

Fact: In the one example working most closely to the new concept, the Dunbury Federation in Dorset, the Audit Commission saw that it did not save a lot of money but judged it *the best value provision of primary education* they had ever seen. Sadly the site guarantees were not long-term and the Governors have closed the smallest site of their own choice when the LEA's plans to enhance that site as a central resource for the four communities fell through for lack of money!

Fact: NASS's partner in arguing the worth of smallness of scale, Human Scale Education, has gained a substantial Government grant to pursue the concept of small scale within a larger secondary school context. The incontrovertible success of small and very small schools argues development of the concept. Just as there can be benefits from large scale within the management of smaller schools, for example collaboration, so larger schools need to use similar concepts of small-scale, human-scale values, with pupils better able to identify with the process, the system and the goals. *NASS affirms that the great majority of pupils in small schools identify fully with the education experience and believe that effort is worthwhile and achievement possible.*

NASS believes that we need more small schools, not fewer of them, and not least in urban and inner city areas where the greater humanity of scale and closer involvement of home and community potentially can prove as effective as they do in the rural setting. NASS wishes education to be returned to its roots in families and communities.

In principle NASS endorses the concept offered by visionary educator Leonard Marsh working decades ago at Goldsmith's College of *a school on every street corner*. Modern technology and architecture make such a vision far more possible, with relevant access to what larger scale still offers of value. The educational arguments and serious untruths trotted out in proposals to close small schools are invariably *wholly unsubstantiated*. When challenged the education officers shaping proposals insist they are right on grounds of "*their experience!*" Yet senior officers are unlikely to have worked in small schools, or even primary education. Most LEA professionals engaged with policy and decision-making will commend larger schools by dint of their own, perhaps successful but individual success in them. Most small schools are in fact succeeding in their first *raison d'etre*, teaching children.

The School in the Community: *The small school also has a community function.* For decades, especially in larger and urban examples, a school's potential community role has been significantly under-played. In rural areas the role of the village school in its community has been an increasingly cogent argument against closure.

Closure proposals recognise the fact but rather grudgingly, as it is not seen really to count compared to the allegedly negative educational and financial arguments.

Fact: In England the model worked naturally in smaller schools is being adopted as desirable and as Government policy for urban, inner city areas. The Government's *Extended Schools* strategy has set a target for every LEA of two such schools by the end of 2006 and generous funding is available. In Newcastle the development of a range of social services concentrated together within the empty space of often large, run-down primary schools is already seen to be raising test standards in the remaining, hitherto rather low-attaining pupils who probably now identify better with a place seen to be of community significance.

Fact: The well-respected US educational philosopher Paul Goodman argued that if New York's entire school administration system were dismantled the money would enable learning groups across the city of 25 pupils and four adults, including a teacher, and using parks, museums, libraries and other public facilities in which to study and through which to connect learning with everyday life. This has today some very wholesome resonance with the availability of modern technology and the argument that to be effective more early learning, especially mathematics, history, geography and science, has to be drawn from the world outside the classroom, namely where the children live. An Oxfordshire village school offered parents up to half a day a week at home with one of their children to do work agreed by child, parent and teacher with a report on it to the school later. It much impressed those involved.

Fact: The US 1970s "Headstart" programme to arrest low educational attainments by investing in earlier partnership between home and school, not least in deprived areas, has been quantified to show that every dollar so invested returns between \$7 and \$10 to the Exchequer. This reflects reduced social distress from low achievement and breakdown between school and home and reduced educational failure, more staying on, more

academic attainment, better jobs and higher taxes. The extra cost of keeping small schools open has similar long-term economic benefit to the wider community and translates as similar wise investment.

Fact: Lifelong learning and effective pre-schooling are both increasingly valued as community-related educational issues and small schools are developing particularly effective practice. ACRE (English Rural Community Councils) published in 2000 the results of its pioneering shared learning project wherein school pupils and members of their local community undertook learning projects together. Community and school planned the work, teachers adapting projects for their curriculum potential.

Fact: Armathwaite First School, cited earlier for its staffing policy, was included in the 2004 study by the DfES of schools offering a distinctive curriculum and its particularly distinctive work involved linking school and community. For example an empty classroom is used by local artists, who share displays of their work alongside the children's in a long corridor, and then give their time and skills for the children when mutually convenient. The school has also developed good ICT partnership with local people. Its positive approach to its community helped secure funding for a purpose-built nursery classroom now attached to the school. Castle Carrock school so excelled in ICT it engaged with its local community to create a major village ICT resource shared by all.

Fact: Under the influence of small schools like these, not forgetting Lowick, cruelly closed by the LEA despite its highly successful work, Cumbria has a network of schools dedicated to educational and community partnership. *The work is seen as a major contribution to the arguments about rural sustainability.*

Fact: *Rural sustainability* in the face of rural depopulation is a major national issue in all parts of the UK. Much discussion is given to issues of jobs, housing, transport, the environment and yet the existence of a school, with its dynamic, beating heart of young families is central to them all and invariably ignored in the glossy brochures of countryside organisations. Rural sustainability is keenly felt as a front-line issue in Wales and Scotland and when local people and politicians realise how much they are often being misled by their professional officers and distracted by false political priorities they get very angry.

Fact: Many rural communities lack adequate access to local medical facilities or adequate transport to urban centres. Provision for elderly people in rural communities, even for things like collecting prescriptions from surgeries three or four miles away, is minimal. Ante-natal and other clinic attendance involve travel. NASS believes schools are already existing public plant able to serve as centres for delivery of local community services and without intruding on the fundamental provision of education.

Fact: Two Oxfordshire village primary schools formed a joint LEA/Schools Council project to develop community links. In one the new purpose-built replacement school building and grounds became a significant community resource. In the other the school worked to develop a parish newsletter from its existing school community version, started a shared monthly club at which older pupils and local people came together for planned learning activities (*the children also prepared and served the refreshments!*) and developed a home visiting programme which brought considerable curriculum support as a result of the local expertise uncovered.

Fact: At a recent conference the current CEO of East Yorkshire outlined his vision of community-integrated local schooling and argued that *"Falling rolls do not mean smaller schools closing. It costs a lot of money to do so. It is more effective to close larger schools."* (NASS has consistently highlighted Audit Commission evidence that surplus space was essentially an urban problem.) This CEO, offering another welcome example of practical, long-term vision, identified schools as community learning centres, 0-90, eco-schools with extended facilities, better-prepared to cope with a world in various crises from oil supply to climate change, a world in which a flight to living in the countryside would gather momentum.

Fact: The small primary school at Stawley in Somerset, faced with the retirement of its local sub-postmistress (a school governor) and no replacement likely, chose the moment to bid for significant funding to re-model its entire provision around comprehensive local service centred on the school as an existing public resource. It thinks to provide a range of local facilities within the overall ambition. It reflects a similar concept introduced in Cambridgeshire in the 1960s and 1970s but not further exploited at the time.

Fact: A school in Wales has established a Post-office on its premises and one in East Yorkshire has a shop. Neither competes with any existing local facility or intrudes on normal professional management of the school. Both provide services otherwise that would have been lost to local people. NASS believes there is much potential for a radical new vision of rural and urban schools as centres of community excellence, adapted to enable both education and local service to be provided. NASS believes this is never more relevant than in terms of transport where answers hitherto have been but a patchwork of provision.

Financial Factors: *Closure arguments, though masked behind false educational shibboleths, are essentially financial. Local authorities always claim small school unit costs are unacceptably high, especially in the smallest schools.*

Fact: Notwithstanding important alternative economic perspectives already argued this unit cost factor is generally true. However, analysis of annual figures across a range of authorities shows that the pattern is far from fixed. A study in Oxfordshire in the mid-1980s showed several schools of small size costing less than some considerably larger.

Fact: Changes of local circumstance, an expensive member of staff retiring, a family moving in, can significantly alter unit costs. Unit costs remain a crude instrument based on here-and-now factors liable to change over time and as such a poor tool for closure decisions which have 'for ever' impact.

Fact: The US 'Headstart' evidence well extrapolates to argue that the cost of small schools almost certainly repays over the longer period. The community worth of a small school is obviously significant. The Aberdeen DOE study not only argued that this value should be part of the financial equations within closure proposals but also the costs of closure to individual families as a result of the changes imposed on their habits.

Fact: A West Suffolk Planning Study, reported in November 1979 in "*Progress in Planning*," looked into the costs of delivering four major local authority services, including education, as part of the decision where to locate large London overspill population. When costed against the tax-paying base within each community the study concluded that service delivery was least expensive in the smaller villages, more costly in the larger villages of then conventional Structure Plans and most expensive in the small towns.

Fact: The Audit Commission in the early 1980s found that even in the most rural counties less was spent on the village citizen than on those living in the small market towns where service provision was far more strongly concentrated. It is the other side of the West Suffolk coin. For taxpayers in small villages the school is one of the few remaining returns they receive *on moneys otherwise spent on the parks, street lights, clinics and other services provided in the towns.*

Fact: The West Suffolk study *so overturned conventional wisdom* that two academic institutions, in Gloucestershire and Bradford, separately replicated the research for education and found it was indeed true. It exposes the limitations of closure arguments based solely on the narrow parameters of variable unit costs within single education budgets. It gives evidence and argument to those local councillors sympathetic to the retention of their schools but hitherto tending to bow before the supposed experience of education officers and Party Whips. As a result arguments and evidence from defenders of small schools can be seriously discounted. Small school closures have significant wider community impact needing to be weighed by all those elected to make local decisions. Decision-makers need the means and the will to challenge officially presented alleged "facts."

Fact: Closure proposals are rarely discussed with Planning Officers outside standard provision of long-term population projections, again usually hotly contested by local campaigners. Very few Education Committees ever meet Planning Committee to discuss rural population levels sufficient to sustain viable schools. Planning officers may even retreat before local anxiety about being swamped with houses. There are very identifiable factors that can meet most such anxieties but which simply are never discussed.

Fact: Figures in closure proposals relating to costs of maintaining existing buildings are very often inflated while those associated with refurbishment of the proposed receiving school, or a complete new building, can be under-represented. Local communities consistently obtain proper professional estimates and quotations for alleged work needed to sustain existing buildings comfortably and at times far below the claimed costs within closure proposals. *One local authority in England failed to include its own architects' costs in the proposals to refurbish the alternative school until after councillors had approved the closure.*

Fact: Oxfordshire Education Committee in the 1980s asked its architects to produce designs for school buildings that might not match conventional aesthetic considerations but which would be durable, demountable, meeting acceptable modern standards but built of less expensive materials. They duly did so but nothing happened. We may now be ready for this radically different approach.

Fact: The long-term costs of the additional school transport required are almost certainly unknown but always assumed as "*reasonable*" whatever the truth may be. *One Local Authority approved a closure without seeing any figures for the long-term required provision of transporting more than 100 pupils twice a day for six years.*

Fact: Somerset, closely followed by Devon, began exploring not long ago a radical and far-sighted idea to reduce the escalating costs of transporting secondary and post-16 pupils. Where pupils might need only a desk, a computer and a mobile phone for one or two days a week, and through creative planning, they would be asked to use space in their local village schools.

Fact: Since that debate started oil prices have risen steeply and will continue so to rise. This makes any such viable alternative strategy very financially attractive. It is a powerful reason to break down the organisational rigidity of much local authority practice.

Fact: *No studies exist confirming that projected savings ever materialise long-term.* At its small schools conference a few years ago the West Sussex Deputy CEO stated that if all its 2 and 3-teacher schools closed, and despite their excellent work, there would be a one-off saving of just £50 for each of the remaining schools. Once again the attitude of senior officers proved central to ultimate decisions. A 1980s Oxfordshire study confirmed an earlier finding in a Rowntree Trust study that this is a firm, if unpalatable truth.

Other Factors *There is a Church factor in UK schooling.* Churches often founded many schools. Philanthropic Trusts were designed to educate local children, not least the poorer ones, and relevant trust deeds often firmly control the status of school buildings. This can in some cases perversely encourage Churches to endorse closure proposals though their inherent charitable nature should prove sympathetically responsive to the educational, family and community virtues of their small schools. Where closure reduces overall church place provision this may be a more worrying factor and in England can absolutely prevent closure.

Fact: *Closure proposals require proper forms of consultation.* Lord Justice Mann in a judgement in the High Court ruled four criteria to be satisfied before consultation was *adequate*. The most critical of these was the requirement for *those consulted to see something of what they contributed during the consultation reflected in the eventual decisions made.* This is almost without exception never the case and the only process capable of arresting the original political goal is the strength of public opposition. In practice consultation is provided within the barest minimum time-limits, often approaching the summer holiday period when many families are away and concerted campaigning more difficult, and in a manner that betrays token compliance with the law. Once over, policy-makers clearly behave as if free to return to their original agenda

Fact: Many such proposals are the kind embracing wholesale reorganisations and rationalisations designed to resolve problems of falling pupil rolls and unfilled places. *In its 1998 "presumption against closure" the Blair government said it was determined to end programmes of wholesale closure.* School Organisation Committees are often told that such powerful, all-embracing countywide policy overrides the priority of the presumption against closure, which nevertheless should still be the first priority for the SOC. Arbitrary local rules of procedure and interpretation of Government advice often lead to limitation of access and representation to SOC's by those opposing proposals.

Despite the Government's clear commitment to rural well-being and the retention of village schools the Exchequer and the DfES, backed by OFSTED and the Audit Commission, continue to demand that local authorities rationalise unfilled places or face financial penalties. Closure is becoming a worrying element once more in England. Staffordshire would *"re-organise"* its Moorlands schools in ways unsympathetic to what Derbyshire does on the other side of the same hills. Cheshire, which went for rural area schools in the 1970s, now pursues similar closure ambitions again. Yet as noted above the Audit Commission has consistently identified surplus places as an urban problem. Such wide disparity of provision weakens the concept of local devolution by betraying any notion of national entitlement or expectation.

Without the "presumption" Welsh and Scottish local education councils have even more vigorously pursued reorganisation programmes prompting wholesale small school closures. However, they have unfortunately and unwisely tied such rationalisation of school estates to refurbishing moneys available through public and private partnership funding. It is a too tempting inducement that in one case meant a proposal closing a highly effective village school so that the proposed receiving school could have specialist all-weather PE facilities.

Fact: NASS is aware of the continuing perception within LEAs of the challenge they have faced from some arms of Government to manage places responsibly in terms of finance. We have argued the inherent contradiction within Government policy as a result and represented these concerns to Government Ministers.

Fact: *We have been told twice in letters from rural Ministers* that the Government sees no connection between the demand to make efficient use of school places and the closure of rural schools. Its Extended Schools policy in urban areas argues its conviction, stated to us, that there are alternative uses for empty space and, failing all else, mothballing is recommended. The Wellesley School project in Newcastle cited above argues the wisdom

of such radical new vision.

Fact: There has thus been an inherent contradiction in the social and financial priorities of national government which continues to provoke the myopic policies of LEAs inherently unsympathetic to small schools while in the devolved nations the tension of that debate is just starting. The whole argument is narrowly and damagingly financial with an urgent need for broader, healthier economic perspectives this paper, for example, presents.

Fact: Much of the unfilled spaces problem arises from earlier building to meet the then numbers bulges from population birth rate. Planners knew inevitably this would fall away as families grew out of school age yet built buildings that are now half empty in many cases. Does any of this yet influence present policy towards new building?

Planners have subsequently allowed much new house building but invariably on the other side of the same towns where unfilled space has become a problem. The education officers could say to the new parents their children must be bussed twice a day three or four miles across town to those empty places in the declining estates. They know parents would refuse and so the trend is to encourage developers to provide schools and roads as part of planning permission for new houses. The economy of this needs to balance the concern at the costs of the empty space and the Government, anyway, now believes it wiser to put this to better use through community provision. This message is not reaching local authorities *still using unfilled places as a pretext to close small schools.*

NASS does, therefore, understand it can be very difficult for local authorities to rationalise their school estates but argues, therefore, for new, radical and creative vision that sees opportunity rather than embarrassment.

We reiterate our belief that more small schools rather than fewer would better serve national need. NASS believes surplus space a community asset well worth targeted investment for adaptation to new and purposeful use. We believe that changes in technology and social habit will make conventional school provision as we have known it very different in the not distant future, with education taking new and often very different forms.

Fact: Cabinet systems of local government were set up to streamline local decision-making by removing non-contentious decisions from the time-consuming attention of Committees, sub-Committees and finally full elected Councils. However, it is clear that this power is being abused by removing from the democratically responsible body, the full elected Council, a final determining role in far more contentious matters such as school closures that significantly affect the whole local authority's well-being. Thus school closure proposals reach the School Organisation Committees, allegedly neutral to manage the former Government role of oversight and fair play, with but the often limited debate and facts available to the few Cabinet members and their professional officers, ultimately those with the most vested interest in securing the decision at the SOC. SOCs as a result are often wilfully starved of balanced evidence and argument.

In Scotland and Wales the development of such systems that so heavily by-pass those elected should be discouraged and resisted. NASS believes current wholesale closure programmes in Scotland and Wales seriously threaten the rich cultural fabric of their respective rural traditions. NASS believes the rapidly changing patterns of educational practice and technology argue that circumstances even ten years away are barely predictable and that as a result policy and provision need to be more flexible, multi-purpose and adaptable. The new, more positive attitudes emerging within the Welsh Assembly and the Scottish Parliament at the end of 2005 are therefore warmly welcomed. NASS will be very happy to work with such constructive ideas towards the concept of the small school at the heart of early education experience, the centre of its family and community life, and the concept of humanity of scale at the heart of life in larger contexts.

NASS believes that education in small schools close to home and involving partnership with local communities is closer to the pattern found most effective over centuries and generations and still the case in families everywhere, for better or for worse. The essential partnership between home and school in raising children to shared acceptable standards of social and personal behaviour is stronger in such a context. We need more small schools and more smallness of scale in education.

NASS believes that economies of scale argued for larger size are intrinsically false and many of

the supposed financial benefits from small school closures have never been demonstrated ever to materialise long-term.

NASS believes society needs children to grow with a sense of personal identity and belonging, tied to valuing the worth of others and a commitment to living in a caring community. NASS believes such concepts not beyond the reach of any school but that they are the living essence of most small schools.

NASS believes present concerns about the quality of society reflect a worrying ambivalence in young people's sense of direction, with possible estrangement from the traditional, eternal values always needed within a healthy community.

NASS believes that competing modern pressures either to succeed, through a headlong pursuit of wealth at one extreme, or to survive at the other, risk a collapse of communal values which nevertheless remain well reflected in the minority of schools that for the time being remain small.

NASS recognises with respect the effectiveness of any school, large or small, that achieves such standards but believes it foolish to close down the central store of excellent social and educational practice we already have in our small schools, just for misplaced, narrowly-analysed, often spuriously calculated and myopic financial arguments.

Accordingly we urge all sharing these concerns to come together in determined common purpose to pursue this radical new vision of educational provision within which our many successful small schools will be a central and fundamental example. We accept that large schools can succeed and small schools can fail. We are concerned, nevertheless, for the very wholesome model of education that is presently reflected in the excellence of the life and work of smaller schools.

Immediate goals:

1 To endorse and strengthen *"the Presumption against Closure"* provided in England and recently argued in an e-petition received by the Scottish Parliament and endorsed by both the Scottish Conservative and Scottish Nationalist Parties, with similar sympathies among Welsh Conservatives and Liberal Democrats.

2 To encourage stronger guidance from central political Parties to their local Parties to resolve present sharp contradictions in policy and belief, and so that a common core of perceived and agreed values is respected notwithstanding the force of particular local needs.

3 To encourage a similarly stronger central set of positive, constructive principles within the Church of England, via the National Society under whose auspices so many schools were opened and now remain in partnership with local authorities. The Roman Catholic community needs similar encouragement, not least with its strong urban presence.

4 To remove the unfilled places problem from financial inducements for refurbishing and replacing buildings as this imposes unfair, irreconcilable pressures on local policy-makers. This would then open radical, new, community-oriented scope for a more creative response to the problem.

5 To secure better rights of appeal than exist currently, even in England where decisions are made by allegedly neutral bodies, the School Organisation Committees. The right of appeal in Wales exists as previously in England but to Government with the declared priority of co-operation with local authorities where closure decisions are most likely to be generated. In Scotland the right of appeal is currently very thin indeed and represents virtual licence for local authorities to do as they please. The ultimate sanction of legal re-dress is often too expensive for local communities to manage.

6 To ensure legally adequate consultation on closure and related reorganisation proposals. The under-developed practice of what is deemed statutory consultation makes a mockery of concepts of adequacy that have already been well-defined in legal precedent in England. Lord Justice Mann has set the rules as cited above and failing other legal precedent these should be better known and understood.

7 To seek effective review of the workings of the School Organisation system with plainly potential vested interest of several kinds, often starved of balanced debate and information and with arbitrary local versions of procedure in terms of access and other rights of campaigners and other interested parties.

8 To seek review and revision of the emerging practice of Cabinet governance at Local Authority level and secure new guidance effectively vesting in democratically elected members of full County and other relevant Councils the final power of recommendation regarding the always controversial matter of small and rural school closures.

9. To better articulate and promote existing examples of effective practice and radical new vision described in this document whilst identifying the undoubted many other examples to be found in the UK.

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