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05 March 2015

## **FROM THE DEPUTY PRESIDENT**

Shared Education and Community Relations Team  
Department of Education  
Rathgael House  
Balloo Road  
Bangor  
Co Down  
BT19 7PR

Sir/Madam,

### **CONSULTATION ON A POLICY FOR SHARED EDUCATION**

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to the above consultation. The Ulster Farmers' Union (UFU) is the largest farming organisation in Northern Ireland representing nearly 12,000 farming families. The UFU represents farmers from all areas of the province and across all sectors.

We have some concerns around the proposals set out in the document, and while we have no objection to the aims of the proposed policy, which is to improve sharing among schools in Northern Ireland, we do have some concerns around potential unintended consequences on schools in rural areas.

In particular, we note the comments from the Ulster Teachers' Union that the strategy in question is "fundamentally flawed" in that it will mean that schools will have to compete with one another for resources and that shared education will pit one school against another in the hope of gaining an increase in pupils numbers since funding is allocated on the basis of pupil numbers.

Rural education is something we as a Union take very seriously, and we firmly believe that every child has the right to a good education no matter where they live. Rural schools may have lower pupil numbers, but they often serve larger areas geographically than their urban counterparts and we believe that this should be a factor in considering how funding is allocated.

If we are to lose more rural schools, more and more pupils will have no choice but to travel to their closest school in a town or city which, coupled with the cessation of the funding for school transport for schools which are not the closest to a pupil's home, effectively removes any choice as to which school is the most suitable for a rural child's educational needs. As well as this, we would be concerned that the extra travelling time required for rural pupils travelling to an urban school would disadvantage them as they will be more tired than their counterparts, and will get to spend less time with their families.

Rural schools are not just educational institutions: they form part of the fabric of rural communities and the loss of a school often means that a rural community loses part of its identity. We would also like to

comment that we were extremely disappointed that the Department for Education has not seen fit to live up to the commitments made in 2002 and in 2011 to rural proof policies and strategies and would like to enquire about the rationale behind the decision not to rural proof this strategy.

I trust our comments will be given full consideration but should you wish to query any comments raised please do not hesitate to get in touch.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Barclay Bell', written in a cursive style. The signature is positioned to the left of a vertical line that extends downwards from the top of the signature area.

**BARCLAY BELL**