



A review of rural education in the Glenkens

Commissioned by the Glenkens and District Trust

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Executive Summary

This report reviews the links between education and the sustainability of rural communities. The review focuses on opportunities and challenges for educational provision in the Glenkens, a dynamic and engaged rural community in Dumfries and Galloway (D&G).

The research reviewed some of the latest national and international research, and created case studies of practical strategies for delivering education in rural areas. The researchers also facilitated community sessions and interviewed people with relevant insights.

Key findings:

- ✓ Educational opportunities are intricately bound up with community and economic development, as well as housing provision, and should not be seen in isolation.
- ✓ The provision of rural education plays critical roles in ...
 - delivering on national (Scottish) and local (D&G) policy to support thriving rural communities, directly addressing depopulation and developing skills, opportunities and resilience for their long-term sustainability;
 - equipping rural communities with the skills to respond to the twin climate and biodiversity emergencies, building on existing local knowledge and experience;
 - sustaining vibrant local economies, through education that meets the recruitment needs of local employers, in the present and the future, and encourages enterprise.
- ✓ Recent rigorous research shows that school closures lead to local rural depopulation in the medium term.
- ✓ Place-based education can contribute to the sustainability of rural areas. It rebalances schooling not just to focus on 'learning to leave', but gives young people skills, opportunities and genuine choice to pursue their lives and careers locally, or elsewhere.
- ✓ Small rural schools face challenges, but can deliver many benefits to their communities and pupils, giving them a sense of belonging, respect and resilience to become responsible and contributing individuals, whatever pathway they take beyond school.
- ✓ There are many successful models of educational provision that have been developed to sustain rural communities in practice, for example,
 - learning locally relevant rural skills, drawing on local knowledge and resources (Perthshire);
 - developing curriculum opportunities and accredited qualifications that create pathways for young people into local employment and enterprise (D&G, Outer Hebrides and the Isle of Wight);
 - Developing life-long learning opportunities through diverse community organisations, in partnership with the public and private sectors (Uist and Denmark).

Hearing the voices of local people led to an emerging vision for education in the Glenkens: to create an educational hub at the heart of the community to deliver rural place-based learning from cradle to grave. The hub could become a centre of excellence for relevant rural skills, for example for the land-based and renewable energy sectors.

This review was commissioned by the Glenkens and District Trust to set out options for educational provision to support the goal within the local Community Action Plan “to be an area where people will want to live, work, bring up their families and grow old.”

The review was delivered by CoDeL, a social enterprise based in the Outer Hebrides with knowledge and experience in rural and island issues across Scotland and internationally, including depopulation and education.

About the authors

CoDeL’s two founding Directors, Thomas Fisher and Theona Morrison (who is also the current Chair of Scottish Rural Action that delivers the Scottish Rural Parliaments), bring extensive experience and understanding of rural issues, not just through research and policy development, but also direct lived experience of delivering and facilitating community action across a wide range of sectors for 20+ and 30+ years respectively in the Outer Hebrides, and previously in many different contexts within Scotland, Britain, Europe and internationally.

Both Theona and Thomas have direct and long-term experience of innovating and delivering education and learning that directly addresses the specific needs of rural communities and local economies.

Theona worked for almost 20 years for the Education Department in the local council in the Outer Hebrides, including a strong focus on enterprise education informed by a deep understanding of local economic literacy. In particular, she developed education linked to the needs of the local economy, and was part of the team that ensured the council adopted the Vocational Education Strategy in 2008. She managed the development of the first crofting course for schools delivered at the local secondary school in Uist, and supported the development of other vocational training matched to the needs and opportunities of the local economy, e.g. in health and social care. She has continued to support this kind of work as a member of the UHI Post Graduate Nursing & Midwifery Committee and of the advisory group that supported Community Land Scotland to develop curriculum resources for schools.

Thomas organised the first Children’s Parliament group of children aged 8 to 13 in Uist and Barra, worked for almost a decade at the local adult education centre, Cothrom, a local social enterprise with a special focus on adults facing challenges in their lives. At Cothrom he developed the Enterprising Young People’s programme with Theona at the Education Department, delivering enterprise workshops for all senior phase pupils across the Outer Hebrides. Thomas also developed two mentoring programmes for young people, and, as a long-term facilitator for the Social Enterprise Academy, designed and delivered the first Wide Horizons programmes for young unemployed people, which have been delivered across the Highlands and Islands, and a range of leadership programmes, including for young leaders in rural and island communities.

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Introduction

Introduction to this review

This review was commissioned by the Glenkens and District Trust (GDT). The Glenkens is an active and engaged rural community in Dumfries and Galloway (D&G). The Trust, established in 2011, is a fund distribution body to resource, enable and stimulate community development in the Glenkens and surrounding communities, defined as the Community Council areas of Balmaghie, Balmaclellan, Carsphairn, Corsock & Kirkpatrick Durham, Crossmichael, St. Johns Town of Dalry, Dunscore, Glencairn, New Galloway & Kells and Parton.

The decision to commission this review was triggered by the proposed mothballing of Dalry Secondary School, but GDT wanted to review options for educational provision within the area more generally, rather than focusing just on the future of Dalry. GDT wanted “research to explore developments in, and discussions around, rural education in Scotland and beyond, particularly in areas that are suffering depopulation and have seen a decline in school rolls”. The aim is that this report “will be used to inform local groups, the Education Forum and the Council on potential options for educational arrangements in our area. Among other benefits this should support the goal in our Community Action Plan to be an area where people will want to live, to work, to bring up their families and to grow old. It could also be used to input into consultations by the Council’s Education Department on the future of education facilities in the Glenkens.”

These aims reflect the integration of this review within other community processes, including the Glenkens and District Community Action Plan (CAP; see [here](#)) and the Education Forum set up by the CAP Steering Group, at the same time that GDT commissioned this review.

The Glenkens is in fact a highly organised community that adopted the CAP in 2020, with three closely connected but distinct voluntary entities to ensure delivery and accountability of the Plan: GDT, the Community Action Plan Steering Group and the Glenkens Community and Arts Trust (GCAT).

At an event on Education and Learning in the Glenkens in July 2024 (see [here](#)), Helen Keron, Executive Manager of GCAT, explained:

The underlying aim of the CAP is for the Glenkens to be ‘a connected, resilient and carbon neutral place, where people will want to live, work and visit, to bring up their families, and to grow old’. The Community Action Plan is fully aligned with D&G Council’s Locality Plans and the South of Scotland Regional Economic Strategy – it represents non-siloed thinking that embodies ‘place’ and community wealth building in their widest senses.

The CAP does not explicitly mention education; it was created by the communities in 2020 in the context that the current educational provision was thought to be assured. However, Education and Learning is an underpinning element of the ‘Economically Flourishing’ theme of the CAP, and the overall goal of sustainable communities. Cradle-to-grave education and learning provision is a crucial part of community wellbeing and empowerment, as well as averting depopulation.

Can we work together to find a pathway between the current status quo and no provision at all? We are looking for a creative solution based on a vision of thriving rural communities where current and future economic development is underpinned by innovative educational provision, working in strategic partnership with businesses, communities and the Council and where all parties are valued for their expertise.

Introduction to CoDeL

GDT commissioned Community Development Lens (CoDeL), based in Uist in the Outer Hebrides (or Western Isles), to deliver the review. CoDeL was launched in 2018 on the back of community-rooted research on young people returning, settling or staying in Uist. This led to collaboration with the James Hutton Institute on the Islands Revival blog bringing together case studies of island communities that were turning the tide of depopulation. This work changed the narrative around island demographics within Scotland.

During Covid CoDeL led the partnership for an EU-funded research project that included 13 universities, research institutes, public bodies and private and social enterprises. The project researched the economic impacts of Covid on so-called 'remote' rural communities across the Northern Periphery and Arctic, from Canada to Finland, and including Scotland and Ireland. This research changed the narrative on 'remote' communities, highlighting their strengths, assets and resilience in times of crisis. The research earned CoDeL the Best RSA Blog Post of 2022 Award from the global Regional Studies Association.

CoDeL has continued to do community-rooted research, on young island voices, rural social enterprise, community responses to evolving environmental policies, and case studies on community action in Uist and the Glenkens (working with GCAT, the Galloway Food Hub and Bairn Banter). CoDeL also delivers Uist Beò, an innovative digital platform to support repopulation within Uist (see [here](#)).

CoDeL's two founding Directors, Thomas Fisher and Theona Morrison (who is also the current Chair of Scottish Rural Action that delivers the Scottish Rural Parliaments), bring extensive experience and understanding of rural issues. This comes not just through research and policy development, but also from direct lived experience of delivering and facilitating community action across a wide range of sectors for 20+ and 30+ years respectively in the Outer Hebrides; and previously also in many different contexts within Scotland, Britain, Europe and internationally. Both Theona and Thomas have direct and long-term experience of innovating and delivering education and learning that directly addresses the specific needs of rural communities and local economies (see further about the authors at the end of this report).

Methodology

This report is based on a review of relevant published literature, interviews, case studies, and local community engagement.

Literature review

Although not always easy to find, there is in fact a significant and growing body of published research on rural education from across Europe and North America, on the challenges and opportunities of small rural schools and how rural education intersects with the development and sustainability of rural communities, including around depopulation. What was immediately apparent from this research is how common the themes and challenges, policy measures and opportunities are across different countries and places, and how emerging research is influencing insights elsewhere within Europe and North America. Dr Anna Karlsdottir, a Nordic academic, for example pointed to "a rapid decrease in the number of schools in rural areas in the Nordic countries" (personal communication). The situation in the Glenkens, and in Dumfries and Galloway generally, is far from unique, and examples and research findings from other countries are of significant relevance.

Interviews and case studies

A larger research project would have allowed more extensive processing of this growing body of published research, which makes clear the impact of rural education policy on the future of young people and of rural communities. This is especially the case when such policy is not designed within a more integrated policy framework, including around depopulation and the climate emergency.

However, the published research does not often reveal practical strategies for delivering effective rural education that can support and sustain local communities and economies amidst the current challenges, not least financial constraints. That is why the methodology included searching for some unpublished materials as well as interviews of individuals with relevant experience and insight. The interviews and other communications have included senior staff within Education Scotland, a senior education policy maker in Ireland, and Headteachers or teachers from other schools.

The insights from this have been captured in a range of case studies found in the appendices to this report, including some case studies written by CoDeL itself. These have been supplemented by case studies which were shared at the event on Education and Learning in the Glenkens in July (see Glenkens and District Community Action Plan Steering Group *et al*, 2024). Material from the case studies is cited in this report, but those who want more detail can view each of the case studies.

Community engagement

The third major component of the methodology has been community engagement, participating in the July event in the Glenkens, delivering two community sessions in the Glenkens itself in September (attended by current and former parents and pupils, and the new Head Teacher at Dalry), and conducting seven interviews, including with the Executive Director of Education in D&G Council. The published research, especially on place-based or place-conscious education, demonstrates that effective educational provision that is rooted in local places and communities must be adapted to the specific context in each place. For example, the local economy and the network of potential partners for engaging with local education will be different in each place. That is why voices and insights of local people are just as important as any published research. Indeed, with the deep commitment to education that communities in the Glenkens have demonstrated over many decades, it is apparent that there is significant insight and experience within the Glenkens, which has informed this review and could help with developing and implementing effective local educational strategies in future.

Context and issues

The context: the Glenkens and Dumfries and Galloway

The Glenkens is a collection of remote-rural villages in Dumfries and Galloway, facing significant challenges of social isolation, rural poverty and inequity of provision. It has an older demographic, with very low numbers of 18-35 year olds. At the same time, the Glenkens has a track record of community empowerment stretching back decades, with many and diverse community organisations and actions. The Glenkens is increasingly organised and ambitious, aligned across the area around the Community Action Plan, published in September 2020 after significant community consultation.

The Glenkens fall within Dumfries and Galloway (D&G) in south west Scotland. The region is a highly rural area, with agriculture accounting for 70% of land, and woodland a further 25%, with only three

towns with a population of more than 5000 people. The opening paragraph of the Vision for Land Use in the Glenkens (see [here](#)) reflects much of D&G as a whole (although not its coastal areas):

We are a forested area, a farming area, an energy generation area. We are a watery area, given life by our rivers and lochs. Our natural environment is so special that we are part of the Galloway and Southern Ayrshire UNESCO Biosphere. Our landscapes attract visitors from all over the world. We are a peaty area and our soil stores some of Scotland's best carbon.

At the same time Dumfries and Galloway faces significant demographic challenges. The D&G Council Plan for 2023-28 (see [here](#)) expects the overall population to decline by almost 3% by 2028. Dumfries and Galloway has a greater proportion of older adults and a median age of 49.6 years compared to Scotland's (42 years). The population is aging and it is expected the proportion of older adults will grow over time with the number of younger people decreasing. The population projections by National Records of Scotland (NRS) in 2018 predicted that by 2043, for every 10 people of working age there will be 9 children or older adults, compared to 7 currently.

The overall vision and ambition of the D&G Council Plan for 2023-28 is *“to be a successful region, with a growing economy, based on fairness, opportunity and quality public services, where all citizens prosper. Working in partnership, with connected, healthy and sustainable communities. The region will be the natural place to live, work, visit and invest.”*

From the Dumfries and Galloway Council Plan for 2023-28: on education

“The Council will improve education and learning opportunities to help all our children, young people and citizens fulfil their potential. This starts with pre-school, then school, before progressing into further or higher education or transition into work.

“We will work with our partners to create and promote lifelong learning opportunities so everyone in the region can live a meaningful and fulfilling life, and contribute to their community.”

** Places of learning are inclusive, sustainable and meet the needs of local communities.

** Children, young people and adults transition successfully through all life stages.

** Young people and adults succeed in what they want to achieve.

** Local people can build their skills and confidence.

Such educational provision will not only directly address aspirations for education within D&G, but also the second principle in the Plan on supporting our citizens, specifically addressing inequalities “to ensure inclusivity, accessibility, celebrate diversity and secure social benefits of change” for all, including in rural communities. One data point in the plan is that “4549 adults and children reported improved mental health and wellbeing through the Council’s lifelong learning activities”.

School closures and rural depopulation

The impact of school closures on rural populations has been keenly debated and researched in many countries, in Britain, across Europe, North America and elsewhere. Some of the most recent rigorous research comes from Scandinavia, which has seen significant school closures across rural areas. The tensions within policy are very similar. “In the debates on possible school closures, policy makers often express their hopes of cost reductions and higher quality in education. On the other hand, local citizens fear that closing their local school will have adverse effects on the community and lead to population decline.” (Sørensen *et al*, 2021, p.226).

Evidence from Denmark and Finland confirms a robust and statistically significant link between school closures and depopulation.

Sørensen *et al*'s research on the impact of the closure of eight rural schools in one municipality in Denmark concludes that there is clear evidence of a negative population effect of rural school closures:

... a statistically significant population decline of 7.6 percentage points was found in the eight communities affected by school closures throughout the 10-year post-closure period. Stated differently, we found that the population development in the affected communities would have been 7.6 percentage points more favourable if the schools had not been closed. (p.233)

Lehtonen (2021) analyses the community-level population effects of 518 school closures that were carried out in Finland during 2011–2018. Of these school closures, 66% were in rural areas.

The major finding of this study is the association of school closures with depopulation of the communities around the closed schools. The results indicate that after school closure, the population of the surrounding community decreases more than before the school closure. Therefore, a primary school seems to be an increasingly important element of the critical services that impact household location decisions. (p.145)

Both studies reveal important aspects of the depopulation that results from school closures. First, the impacts of school closures are often very local, within the immediate local communities. Lehtonen's analysis in Finland focuses on small catchment areas: the 5-km and 10-km catchment areas encompassing the local communities surrounding the school closures.

Second, there is a time lag in those impacts. Sørensen *et al* used a 10-year timeframe, discovering that “the population decline first got statistically significant from the sixth year following the closures and onwards. ... if we had used a post-closure period shorter than 6 years, we would not have found any significant population effect.” (p.233)

It is obvious that a school closure may not lead to families moving away immediately, as they are bound by many other social, cultural and economic ties. “The delayed materialization of negative population consequences suggests inertia in the reaction towards the school closures. Residents in the affected areas may need time to evaluate the new situation and to possibly react to it, e.g. by moving away” (Sørensen *et al*, 2021, p.231). And the critical impact of reduced in-migration of families returning or settling, because there is no local school, will also take time to manifest itself in the data, as research from Canada demonstrates (Foster *et al*, 2021, p.23)

... the [Canadian] data analysed for this article provide support for the common belief that the presence of community schools helps communities, rural, urban, or otherwise, retain and attract young population. We find that communities closer to a school [both elementary and secondary] are more likely to see immigration of school-age children.

The evidence from Ireland also lends support (see Case Study 4 in the Appendices). “National and international data supports the Inishbofin islanders’ contention that appropriate education provision on the island increases sustainability of the community, as stated in their submission to the Department of Education requesting a post-primary school on the island.” When the Department turned down this request on the grounds of small pupil numbers, the Ombudsman for Children’s Office challenged the decision on the basis of human rights, and stated, “If the school was opened the numbers would grow as living on the island would be made viable for families with children or planning to have children, and families who have left could now return with their children.”

It is these two important insights, the local impacts and the time lag for those impacts to arrive, that distinguish the research from other earlier studies, which often used wider regional or municipal data and shorter timeframes, such as 2-year or 4-year post-closure periods. In consequence, earlier studies delivered either mixed results or no population effect of rural school closures.

Sørensen *et al* complemented their demographic analysis with qualitative research, interviewing local people on the impact they experienced from the school closures (pp.231-33). They “reported of families with children who had moved away from the village as a direct result of the school closure.” The most frequent negative consequences mentioned included “depopulation, difficulties in attracting and retaining families with school-aged children, eroding social connections”, “less people volunteering and a decline in the number of members in local associations” pointing to “an erosion of social capital in the community” and even “social fragmentation”, especially among children who were sent to different schools after their local school closed.

The research by Sørensen *et al* in Denmark and by Lehtonen in Finland confirms a robust link between school closures and local depopulation, which comes after a time lag, and is supported by the research from Canada also.¹

This presents a significant challenge to Dumfries and Galloway, a rural region facing an ageing population and depopulation, that has 100+ schools, many of them small and old. Critical considerations for council policy are not just financial constraints, or even just educational policy, but the wider impacts of school policy in the context of overall council policy, especially in addressing depopulation. As the Commission on the Delivery of Rural Education in Scotland recommended back in 2013 (Scottish Government and COSLA, 2013),

Local authorities, together with their health and other Community Planning partners, should consider rural education holistically for their area, from early years to further and higher education, actively seeking solutions to enhance the viability of rural communities. [emphasis added]

Centralisation vs. local educational provision

“The reasons behind school closures in most countries are cited typically as financial (i.e. small rural schools are too costly to run in comparison to larger schools).” (Fargas-Malet and Bagley, 2022, p.830). In the recent long period of deep austerity it is not surprising that many local authorities have struggled with maintaining small schools. Nevertheless, financial reasons are not the only factor involved. For

¹ Dr Anna Karlsdottir, a spatial geographer at the University of Iceland and Nordregio, who has reviewed spatial disparities in the significant school closures seen across the Nordic region this century (e.g. in Karlsdottir *et al*, 2019), writes: “One thing is sure, that the attraction value/amenity value of potential future inhabitants with kids declines with local schools closing down. That then reduces the regional ability for transition and renewal.” (personal communication)

example, issues like the breadth of curriculum choice and other opportunities, as well as pupil socialisation, are important other considerations for children and parents.

However, extensive relevant research suggests that there may well also be underlying biases against rural education, biases that are in fact reflected across much public policy. Michael Corbett was the first to articulate these concepts most clearly, in his thesis and book, *Learning to Leave* (2007), about rural education in Nova Scotia in Canada. The blurb for the book states:

This innovative case study from Nova Scotia analyzes the relationship between rural communities and contemporary education. Rather than supporting place-sensitive curricula and establishing networks within community populations, the rural school has too often stood apart from local life, with the generally unintended consequence that many educationally successful rural youth come to see their communities and lifestyles as places to be left behind. They face what Michael Corbett calls a mobility imperative, which, he shows, has been central to contemporary schooling. Learning to Leave argues that if education is to be democratic and serve the purpose of economic, social, and cultural development, then it must adapt and respond to the specificity of its locale, the knowledge practices of the people, and the needs of those who struggle to remain in challenged rural places.

Learning to Leave has triggered much additional research. For example, Gulløv and Gulløv (2020) clearly analyse how children and young people in rural Denmark are educated to leave, from early learning in nurseries through the choices that young people are forced to make in terms of their secondary education, all within a system in which almost all further and higher education has been highly centralised in the past few decades.² The impact on further rural decline is hardly surprising.

In a later lecture, Corbett (2021) argues that centralisation promoted on the premise of increased efficiency has in fact long been core policy across developed economies, from health-care provision to education:

... the relentless centralization and bureaucratization of public services whose mandate is principally driven by the establishment of performance norms and the application of standardized indicators to quantify relative performance across space. These comparative metrics, in turn, support managerialism and the marketization of education. (p.2)

Corbett analyses how such centralisation has its roots in thought and policy since the mid-19th century, since when the primacy of centralised and urban centres was seen as embodying modernity and progress, while rural, and especially small rural, was seen as backward and in decline. Powerful economic and political dynamics, which have drawn social, cultural and educational policy and practice in their wake, have led to the rapid growth of urban living and an apparently relentless decline in rural populations.

The evidence from Canada and Denmark confirms that these processes have meant that schooling in rural areas has often focused on educating young people to leave or even escape their place, and to pursue aspiration and success in urban centres, through the pursuit of ever more specialist and

² Gulløv and Gulløv directly link the findings of their own research to Corbett's: "As argued by Corbett & Forsey (2017), in the organisation of the education system, curriculum, assessments, counselling, teachers' preferences and indeed the whole educational mindset there is a fundamental orientation toward an urban middle-class way of life with an emphasis on individual aspirations and social flexibility. These values permeate the students' beliefs and hierarchies in terms of what is desirable and recognisable. Despite the fact that a local sense of social commitment and attachment is regarded in general as positive in the local setting, the high-school students [in Denmark] refer to it mostly as an obstacle which has to be overcome in order to gain success in an urban, middle-class way." (p.122)

narrowly-defined knowledge, which is assigned the highest value in our economic and social structures.

Significant recent publications suggest that many research agendas, including on education provision, have in fact been deeply influenced by a deficit perspective on rural areas, rather than recognising and valuing the many assets and strengths of rural communities. In the book *Ruraling Education Research* Roberts and Guenther (2021) devote considerable attention to this issue:

... remote is often conceptualised as peripheral to the city by distance as well as socially and culturally. However ... for people whose families live in remote towns, it is the city that is distant and peripheral. Such perspectives are rarely considered in discussions of educational policy. To address this, and other, implicit biases, this chapter examines how language socially constricts the 'problem' to be solved, rather than implicitly valuing people, places, and communities. (p.13, emphasis added)

The counterpoint to centralisation rooted in seeing rural areas as backward is a strong emerging focus within research, as well as practice on the ground, of place-based or place-conscious education.


Place-conscious education is a response to more than a century of what Wendell Berry (1997) called 'unsettlement,' or the progressive emptying of the countryside, which has detached the majority of people in advanced capitalist societies from the sources of the energy, food, and materials necessary for shelter and comfort, while at the same time vilifying rural people and places as backward. A focus on place in education also confronts "metrocentric" education and social policy that fail to account for differences between places and how rural areas have been largely absent from key educational discussions. (Corbett, 2021, pp.1-2)

Many of the principles underlying a place-based approach to education are in fact reflected in the principles set out in the Dumfries and Galloway Council Plan overall for supporting communities:

Principles - delivering the outcomes (cont'd)



Support our communities



Empowering communities and individuals: empower customers, communities and staff and build skills and confidence to enable people and communities to achieve their ambitions.

Focus on local and place: use places, wards and school clusters as the basis of local planning and delivery; and embrace the creativity and resilience of our places and people.

Work in partnership: ensure that service delivery is achieved, working alongside communities and with local, regional and national partners.

Invest to enable change: encourage and attract inward investment to deliver the ambitions of communities and local people.

They are also reflected in Scottish Government policy: “We know that a place-based approach to applying national, regional, and local policies will be essential to sustainably and effectively address depopulation.” (Scottish Government, 2024, [Addressing Depopulation Action Plan](#)). This applies to education policy as much as policies in any other sector.

The next section on small schools will reflect more on the value of place-based education. Here we conclude that the drive for efficiency savings, especially in times of austerity, presents a significant

challenge for Dumfries and Galloway as a primarily rural region, but also an opportunity to build on its extensive rural assets. One of the key principles to emerge from this research (see pp.29-30 below) is that rural education “needs to be rooted and connected in the place, drawing on local assets, connections, networks and partnerships, and incorporating local experience and knowledge, including experience and skills in adapting rapidly to changing circumstances. Educational provision needs to demonstrate in practice, from nursery through further and higher education to life-long learning, that it values local assets and strengths, experience and knowledge.” With its over 100 schools, most of them rural, Dumfries and Galloway is well placed to develop this principle in practice. And, as we shall see, this is also critical amidst the twin climate and biodiversity emergencies.

It is important to recognise that there should be no assumption that young people must stay in their rural areas. What is required is to recognise “a core tension between pedagogies of belonging and pedagogies of mobile aspirations” (Cuervo *et al*, 2019). What is required is a significant rebalancing of schooling that does not just focus on learning to leave, but gives rural young people genuine choice and opportunity (a) to pursue their lives, and work, locally within their community, or (b) to migrate elsewhere, whether to urban or other rural places, or (c) to pursue a mix of these options. Including significant opportunities to develop skills relevant to rural life (see the Case Studies from the Western Isles and on Breadalbane for examples) can contribute to this rebalancing to give young people genuine choice, including to develop a career path locally.

And the community consultation complemented this focus on formal schooling to include broader educational provision for the community as a whole that enables local rural people to enhance their knowledge and skills to meet their personal and community aspirations throughout their lives. This is already reflected in the Dumfries and Galloway Council Plan for 2023-28: “We will work with our partners to create and promote life-long learning opportunities so everyone in the region can live a meaningful and fulfilling life, and contribute to their community.”

Opportunities and challenges of small schools

In the previous section we explored a potential bias within much policy against rural, seeing it as backward. It is also important to draw attention to a potential bias against small schools. The two biases are of course closely related, as reflected in Fargas-Malet and Bagley’s article in 2022, titled “A scoping review of 21st-century research on small rural schools in Europe”. The authors report that

in several countries ... there is a policy bias which presumes that rural schools are somehow deficient, that multi-age teaching in small rural schools is ‘inferior’ to age homogenous teaching in larger schools, and that the way to improve rural education is making schools bigger. Significantly, these prejudices seemingly exist despite little or no hard evidence that pupils in small schools do worse than others in larger ones. (p.830)

This is confirmed by Sørensen *et al* (2021: p.226):

Studies have found that school closures have reduced costs, while empirical studies on whether sending pupils to larger schools improves student achievement have produced mixed results. Moreover, several studies have stressed the importance of the local school for the local community. Thus, small rural schools have been found to promote social cohesion and social capital, be rich on parent involvement, and to contribute to the general ‘health of a community’.

The authors (p.227) quote Wood, on rural schools as “not only an educational establishment, but also a focal point for community life”.

Fargas-Malet and Bagley's review of research on small schools identifies a range of common challenges, including financial pressures and inadequate infrastructure, falling school rolls and the challenges of delivering a wide-ranging curriculum. There are also challenges around recruiting and retaining teachers, as well as challenges for teachers in the job, including intense workloads, multi-age teaching and professional isolation.

Nevertheless, Fargas-Malet and Bagley conclude their review as follows (pp.839-40):

despite all the challenges mentioned, teachers and principals have expressed being satisfied with working in a small rural school, and some believed that it was a good learning environment for all pupils, including those with special needs. In fact, small rural schools have also been shown to provide multiple opportunities to teachers, principals, pupils and the communities they serve. Firstly, small rural schools are possibly well placed to provide 'a place-based curriculum', which emphasizes children's relationship with nature and promotes local history and culture. Secondly, small rural schools appear better able to form strong links to their communities, as well as utilize the communities' potential to enrich the educational experience of their pupils, which in turn builds social capital and social cohesion. Thirdly, small rural schools have shown their potential to identify and address pupils' individual needs. Finally, small rural schools have been used as a testing ground for innovation. In relation to all of the above, and returning to the title of our paper, small would in some ways still appear to be beautiful!

In Ireland, according to Joe McHugh the Minister for Education and Skills in 2019, almost half of all schools are small schools, and almost 15 per cent of all Irish children attend one (see Case Study 4 in the Appendices). The Irish Government takes a positive attitude towards small schools, both primary and secondary, and is committed to supporting and strengthening them:

Small schools can and do provide an excellent education to our children, right in the heart of their communities. I went to a small school as a child. I live in an area where small schools are a facet of life and that is replicated up and down the country. They are often the heartbeat and lifeblood of a community. ... Ní neart go cur le chéile – we need to work together to find new ways of supporting small schools [to ensure their long-term sustainability].

This commitment to small schools continues, with the Secretary of State for Education in Ireland, Minister Foley, stating in May 2024 that

small schools are a support and a beacon for local communities. They are at the heart of educating generations of young people and providing a focal point for families and communities. ... small schools collaborating and working together offers promise for the future.

Similarly, in 2023 the Nordic Rural Youth Panel (Nordregio, 2023) also included the following recommendation among its 40 recommendations for rural revitalisation: "Working to maintain and develop smaller schools in rural areas, as they are important for both children and the local community. At the same time, cooperation should be promoted between smaller schools".

It is important to emphasise that while the research on small rural schools cited above includes many small primary schools, some small secondary schools are also included in the evidence base, including in the Irish example.

The advantages of small schools featured prominently in the community consultation in September, where ex- and current pupils of Dalry primary and secondary school shared a story or example of how their small local schools had benefited themselves or others (see Box and also the Appendices).



An obvious challenge for small schools may be to offer a wide subject choice for pupils, which the community consultation identified as a significant concern for current and potential future parents within the Glenkens. Evidence from two small secondary schools interviewed during this research demonstrates that a flexible and can-do approach by the school management can overcome this challenge to deliver significant personalisation of pupil choices across a wide range of subjects, especially when sharing teachers with other neighbouring schools, and supplemented with some on-line provision also.

The evidence from Ireland reinforces this (see Case Study 4 in the Appendices):

Notwithstanding the additional challenges faced by [five small post-primary] island schools arising from their off-shore remote locations, these Education Training Board island schools have built up a reputation for being well led and managed, academic excellence, resilience, innovation in adopting and adapting teaching and learning methodologies, including experimenting with distance learning to best support their communities.

When it comes to pupil socialisation, some families want to choose larger schools, but small schools can deliver advantages, including for particular pupils. This is reflected in the Glenkens already, where the D&G Council's willingness to give parents a free choice about which school their children attend has meant that 5 out of the current 13 pupils at Dalry Secondary School come from outwith the catchment area. One of the main attractions for families is the small size of the school which allows a more personalised education with closer relations among peers and between pupils and teachers.

Head teachers of small secondary schools I spoke to feel that the pupils coming out of their schools are often more socially able than those coming out of larger schools due to the fact that pupils relate to people of all ages and have learned to work alongside others who they may not see eye-to-eye with, and therefore develop empathy and respect for others. (Sarah Ade)

Small schools deeply connected to their community can also be very good at nurturing a sense of belonging and being rooted. In a rapidly and sometimes dramatically changing world, a sense of belonging, of having an identity that is deeply rooted, can be a critical strength for young people growing up in today's world. As one of the participants in the community consultation said,

Going to Carsphairn and then Dalry enabled me to feel truly rooted within my community; from this I was able to move away and engage with other communities, before coming 'home' to raise my own children. I think a strong sense of community is key to feeling secure and grounded in life [generally].

The case study of Baltasound Junior High School in Shetland (Case Study 3 in the Appendices) shows how much a school can actively build connection with the local community. In the fortnight prior to the interview, the coastguard, the fire service and the local health centre had all visited the school or been visited by pupils. The school even has “Bring your Parent Days”, where parents follow their children for the whole day in school. The Headteacher explained, “They are absolutely knackered at the end of the day, but they love opportunities to come into the school. We are the hub of community activity. One school, one community.”³

The demands of the twin climate and biodiversity emergencies

There is rapidly increasing evidence of the impact of the climate and biodiversity emergencies, on local communities, nations and globally. These emergencies demand responses across all policy areas. Within their Plan for 2023-28, Dumfries and Galloway Council has positioned *Safeguarding our Future* as the very first principle:

- *Address the climate emergency: urgently respond to climate change and transition to a carbon neutral region.*
- *Protect our natural capital: protecting and enhancing our region's natural capital and habitats through conservation and sustainable development.*

In the Scottish context, the vast majority of natural assets, including Scotland's biodiversity, are located in rural Scotland, including of course within Dumfries and Galloway. Education will therefore play a key role in addressing the climate and biodiversity emergencies, by enabling rural people and communities to have the skills and be equipped to manage those resources effectively.

As the Commission for the land-based learning review reported to the Scottish Government (2023:1):

The Commission has sought to review learning in Scotland's land-based and aquaculture sectors - from early years to adulthood The aim of the work is to help deliver a just transition to net-zero, by ensuring the learning system equips people with the skills and knowledge both they and the Sector requires and that the workforce is sufficient.

... Collectively these [land-based] industries utilise and manage the majority of Scotland's land and coastal areas and have the largest impact on our environment. More recently, the land-based industries have also been included within 'Green Careers' recognising the key role the Sector plays in nature restoration, climate change mitigation and adaptation.

... the wide variety of career opportunities available across all of the Sector's industries reflect the specialist skills and knowledge required to produce food and raw materials from our natural environment in a safe and sustainable manner. This includes the need to manage land in a way that continues to provide a range of ecosystem services such as flood protection, pollination and opportunities for recreation. The recent increase in the number of skilled workers needed to meet

³ The day includes having school dinners with the pupils. “Complaints about the quality of school dinners tend to stop after this!”

long term Scottish climate and biodiversity targets also presents an opportunity to improve wellbeing and increase our national connection with nature.

Yet across the Sector, businesses are experiencing workforce shortages and struggling to recruit. Given their importance in terms of food and materials production, addressing the nature and climate crises and supporting rural communities and the economy, it is imperative that we find solutions which attract more entrants, widen the pool of applicants, and increase training opportunities.

Likewise, the Irish Government published *The 2nd National Strategy on Education for Sustainable Development – ESD to 2030* in June 2022 (see [here](#)). Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) has three interlinked and equally important strands: Environmental, Social and Economic Sustainability. The accompanying *ESD to 2030 Implementation Plan 2022 – 2026* sets out the roadmap to achieving its targets by 2030 “across the Education Sector from early learning and care to third level and beyond to non-formal and informal education”.

ESD aims to ensure that all learners have the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development. ESD is acknowledged as a key enabler for the achievement of all 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Funding of €250,000 is being delivered to organisations to support them in carrying out ESD related projects to schools, including, for example, making the school and its grounds more sustainable; teacher training in ESD; student projects; collaborative projects between the school and the local community, etc.

None of this should be seen as a call for urban based experts needing to educate backward rural residents. The Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) has stated very clearly that current policies and frameworks “emanating from predominant political and economic decisions based on a narrow set of values ... will fail to deliver on climate and biodiversity” until they incorporate the understanding, perspectives, values and worldviews of local communities and indigenous peoples (IPBES, 2022). This places the experience, knowledge and worldviews of local communities, especially rural communities, at the very heart of effective responses to the climate and biodiversity emergencies.

Abi Mordin, founder member of Propagate (see Case Study 9 in the Appendices) and local resident, is just one among many with local experience and knowledge rooted within Dumfries and Galloway itself. In reflecting on education amidst the climate and biodiversity emergencies, Abi states,

The principles of soil function are still not being taught in schools and agricultural colleges, despite the fact that healthy soil is vital for plant growth and nutrition, is more resilient to the impacts of flood and drought, and stores more carbon. The understanding of the role played by soil has progressed dramatically in recent years, but information about management for carbon sequestration, soil health, climate change, livestock and people has not yet been incorporated into the curriculum.

The Dumfries and Galloway Learning for Sustainability Partnership Group has been set up, having identified big gaps in the provision of education across food, food security and sustainability. The Learning for Sustainability Action Plan highlights the importance of embedding this into the curriculum, but this is not yet being delivered in schools as teachers have not been trained to deliver the subject.

A note on integrated policy

The overall vision and ambition of the Dumfries and Galloway Council Plan for 2023-28 is

to be a successful region, with a growing economy, based on fairness, opportunity and quality public services, where all citizens prosper. Working in partnership, with connected, healthy and sustainable communities. The region will be the natural place to live, work, visit and invest.

The plan itself sets out an integrated vision across different sectors and policies, and seeks to embrace the creativity and resilience of local places and people, and to make rural communities and places vibrant and thriving.

With over a third of the council's budget spent on education, educational provision within D&G's many rural communities must play a critical element of any strategy to deliver on the council's vision. Educational provision cannot be seen on its own, but must contribute to delivering environmental, demographic and economic sustainability for rural communities across D&G. This includes investing in people through education: "Dumfries and Galloway is shaped and defined by the people who call it home. They are its lifeblood and reflect the history, heritage and culture of the region."

This means that considerations for educational provision are not just financial constraints, or even just educational policy, but the wider impacts of school and education policy in the context of overall council goals, especially in addressing depopulation. The Commission on the Delivery of Rural Education recommended back in 2013 (Scottish Government and COSLA, 2013),

Local authorities, together with their health and other Community Planning partners, should consider rural education holistically for their area, from early years to further and higher education, actively seeking solutions to enhance the viability of rural communities. [emphasis added]

This is reflected in the D&G Council Plan:

Together with partners, the Council will strive to promote a region of opportunity and innovation – where natural capital drives green growth, ambition and quality of life rivals the best in the UK, communities are empowered and cultural identity and heritage are cherished. This will enable people to thrive and attract a new generation to live, work, visit, learn and invest in the South of Scotland.

The box contains some other relevant recommendations from the Commission, which were highlighted by our Irish sources who derived inspiration from the Commission's work.

The Commission for the Delivery of Rural Education was asked to review the Schools Consultation Scotland Act 2010 and its application, and make recommendations on the delivery of all aspects of education in rural areas. Thirty-eight clear recommendations were made, including:

- The Scottish Government and local authorities should agree a coherent rural regeneration strategy to support economic outcomes for rural areas.
- Local authorities, the Scottish Government, teaching institutions and trade unions should work together to explore innovative solutions to reduce the barriers to teaching in remote areas; and to ensure effective delivery of CPD to teachers in rural schools, learning from international best practice to reduce teachers' isolation and sustain skills and development.
- There must be a commitment to resource the curriculum in small rural secondary schools to support the achievement of positive outcomes and destinations for young people. This will require innovative and flexible arrangements to be developed including use of local primary school teachers and other experts within the local community. (Note: Experts within the local community were used in the Outer Hebrides to deliver the boatbuilding and crofting courses.)

Potential models: evidence from within and beyond D&G

This section contains evidence of good practice that is captured in the case studies. The case studies demonstrate potential models that could prove effective in addressing some of the issues and challenges set out above. Many of the examples focus on the links between education and the local economy and community, including pathways into employment for young people, but also supporting local enterprise. Others deal with curriculum choices, including learning to help address the climate and biodiversity emergencies. And the final example focuses on life-long learning opportunities.

Example 1: Rural skills (Breadalbane Academy and the Rural Skills Training Centre)

An obvious starting point for reviewing potential models is delivering education on rural skills that are relevant to rural communities across D&G, including of course within the Glenkens. There is an existing Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) accredited National Progression Award in Rural Skills, described as “a starting place for candidates pursuing a future in one of the major land-based industries” (see <https://www.sqa.org.uk/sqa/41752.html>); it also includes a qualification at National 4 level.

The case study of Breadalbane Academy in the Appendices demonstrates just how effective education for rural skills using these SQA qualifications can be. Initially developed with funding from Lantra, delivery of the course builds on significant assets and opportunities, like the many farms and estates within a 10-mile radius of the school. The subject provides opportunities to gain qualifications, specific tickets (e.g. in operating quad bikes and maintaining chainsaws) and significant practical work experience. There are many different pathways, so it is great for diverse pupils. The course delivered at Breadalbane has received glowing SQA reports, not least because of how good many of the local partners are in delivering opportunities for practical experience and learning.

The current course lead at Breadalbane reckons that 50% of pupils taking rural skills end up in local employment in land-based activities. Many of them might have done so anyway, as they come from families with similar employment. However, not only does the rural skills course provide opportunities to gain tickets, qualifications and experience, it also values, affirms and accredits skills that some pupils come with already through their family background. This is hugely important for place-based education, recognising and building on local skills, and valuing pupils for skills they may already have. As the course lead said, “I have learnt a huge amount myself about sheep, pigs and deer from pupils who could easily deliver a lesson based on knowledge and skills they are already masterful in”.

An example from within Dumfries and Galloway of working effectively with local partners to deliver locally relevant skills is the forestry classroom at Dalbeattie High School funded by Jas P Wilson, a large forestry and firewood machinery suppliers and engineers based in the town. And here are reflections by Wallace Currie, a lecturer based at SRUC’s Barony campus in Dumfries and Galloway (Currie, 2024):

As a former lecturer and Nuffield Scholar who’s traveled extensively to study global agricultural education, I’ve seen the transformative power of integrating rural topics into learning. ... In the Netherlands, Switzerland, and New Zealand, for example, students engage directly with agriculture, gaining insights into food production and sustainability. These experiences equip young people with practical knowledge, foster a deep connection to the land, and prepare them for futures in rural industries or as informed consumers. ... By integrating topics like farming, environmental stewardship, and sustainability into early education, we can inspire a passion for these fields long before young people consider their careers.

Example 2: Subject offerings and accredited qualifications relevant to the local economy (Outer Hebrides, Dumfries and Galloway, and the Isle of Wight)

The rural skills qualifications are just one example of subject offerings in local schools that include qualifications to meet recruitment needs of local businesses, in the present and the future, and to provide pathways for pupils to realise those opportunities, either by staying or returning. Such offerings are critical if educational provision is going to address depopulation, whether within the Glenkens, Dumfries and Galloway as a whole or elsewhere, and the range of potential subjects and qualifications is significant. In addition many local employers state that they have recruitment gaps, which is confirmed within the wider community.⁴

The Box takes information from Case Study 1 in the Appendices to reflect the strategy adopted by Comhairle nan Eilean Siar (CnES), namely a formal Vocational Educational Strategy, to address similar needs across the Outer Hebrides.

To address the dire population projections, a formal Vocational Educational Strategy was introduced and adopted in 2008. Local Labour Market Intelligence (LLMI) was key to informing decisions around which courses would be introduced into the curriculum, based on 'where the jobs would be in the future'. If it was identified that a sector of the economy was struggling with recruitment gaps or predicted to expand, but an appropriate course didn't exist, a writing group was established and the courses were commissioned, written, verified and accredited, with parity of esteem to sit alongside the qualification diet offered to pupils. It was important that courses were not just for the less able, but relevant to all pupils.

Such courses included, at National 5 level, [Harris Tweed](#), [Crofting](#), [Maritime Skills](#) and, at Higher Level 6, [Local Food Production](#), which could provide progression following a number of courses including the crofting course. The strategy meant every child had the entitlement to a nationally accredited industry recognised qualification linked to employability within the local economy informed by LLMI.

The delivery of the courses, along with many Skills for Work courses, were delivered, at least in part, by an industry experienced tutor. This gave pupils learning in context and relevance which proved successful and popular with pupils.

Other courses were already available through SQA but were not necessarily offered by the schools. In this case any accredited presenting centre could verify and deliver the course. For example, a collaboration between Stirling University and the Western Isles Health Board created a Pre-Nursing Scholarship to address recruitment gaps in the nursing sector. Further collaboration followed with the Education Department of CnES and Cothrom, a local training centre. All this enabled young people to gain relevant work-based experience in the local hospital, clinic and GP practices and gain qualifications, equivalent to at least two Highers, for entry into a nursing degree. Subsequently this was replaced by the Foundation Apprenticeship in Health and Social Care, with the addition of the Scottish Vocational Qualification (SVQ) 2 in social care, which is essential to access employment within the social care sector.

This was a council wide programme of curriculum development, including local labour market intelligence, effective partnerships (including with employers in the public, private and Third sectors), course design, all

⁴ Compare the situation in Nordic countries: "There is already a severe lack of care workers, nurses, ICT workers, carpenters, electricians, mechanics in many rural areas of the Nordic countries" (Karlsdottir *et al*, 2019, p.21).

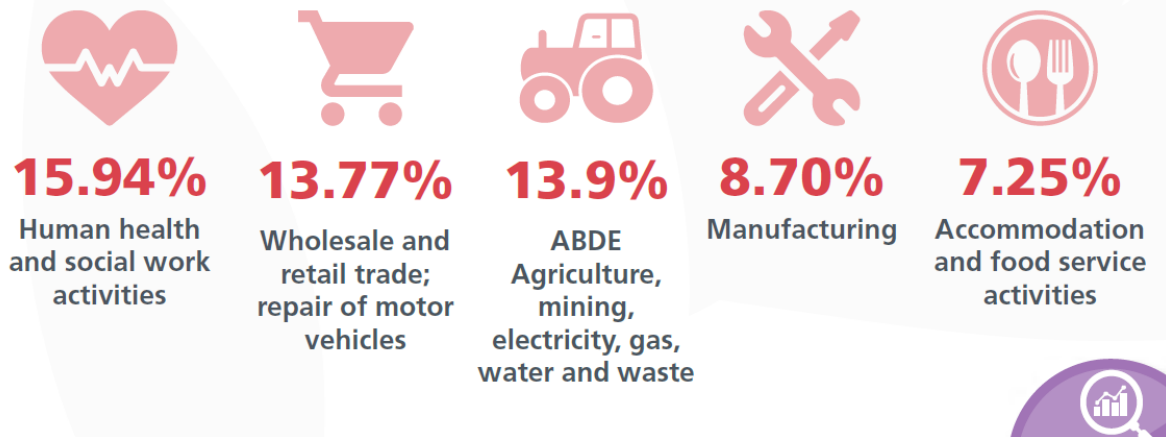
within an overall integrated strategy. Initially the delivery of specific courses was located in one secondary school (e.g. maritime studies in Barra and crofting in Uist), but as internet-based teaching was developed across the Outer Hebrides (including through e-Sgoil, CnES' online teaching and learning platform), some of the courses became available to pupils in the other secondary schools also.

Obviously a different set of qualifications will be relevant within the Glenkens and within Dumfries and Galloway. We have not engaged in any review of local labour market intelligence in D&G. However, drawing on the D&G Council Plan for 2023-28, as well as the record of the Education and Learning in the Glenkens event, some of the key sectors within the local economy that (a) provide opportunities for local young people to stay and (b) support the sustainability of local communities are:

- agriculture, forestry and renewable energy;
- other land and environmental based activities (UNESCO biosphere, peat restoration, dark skies, etc. etc.);
- all public sector services, including health and social care;
- digital services;
- culture, heritage (including industrial heritage) and arts;
- hospitality and tourism;
- a wide range of micro- and community enterprises.

The following figure, taken from the D&G Council Plan for 2023-28, reflects the largest employment sectors currently across Dumfries and Galloway as a whole.

TOP 5 Industries in employment numbers:



It is equally important to consider, like in the Outer Hebrides, which jobs are likely to be needed in the future. A very good example comes from the presentation by Vattenfall Wind Power at the event on Education and Learning in the Glenkens in July (See Case Study 8 in the Appendices). Senior Project Manager Matthew Bacon is currently overseeing the site design and planning permission process for the Quantans Hill wind farm near Carsphairn, and said,

Onshore wind is a growth area, and the number of qualified employees needs to vastly increase to meet the demands of the 2030 deadline. Most of Vattenfall's renewables developments will be in the Highlands and Dumfries & Galloway, and there are a huge range of roles in the sector, ranging

from construction, forestry, turbine construction and maintenance to environmental work and project managers. ... the Climate Exchange May 2024 report ... showed that operational positions needed on wind farms are predicted to rise by 250% by 2030 in Dumfries and Galloway, from 112 to 395 positions. These are long-term, well-paid roles.

Vattenfall's apprenticeship programme will create 50 new apprenticeships by 2030, working with Developing the Young Workforce. The company is looking to recruit across a wide range of ages to both graduate and early stage apprenticeships. Vattenfall asked consultants to come up with a draft strategy for the community benefit fund from Quantans Hill wind farm if consented, and through this have identified objectives relating to jobs and young people, including access to local economic opportunities. This could lead to training 250-350 young people and providing up to 50 qualified apprentices, although these numbers are currently indicative and the strategy is still a draft. However, this potentially offers huge opportunities for South West Scotland in terms of renewables posts. The benefits of this scheme can potentially be maximised if other wind farm developers work with Vattenfall on supply chains and with schools and colleges to develop a joined-up scheme.

While there was need in the Outer Hebrides to develop new qualifications, which may also be appropriate for the Glenkens and for Dumfries and Galloway as a whole, many suitable courses already exist in the SQA menu of courses, and can be utilised quickly. Examples include:

- Foundation Apprenticeships in Health and Social Care, to which can be added SVQ 2 in Social Care as that is a requirement to work in the sector (<https://www.sqa.org.uk/sqa/76825.html>);
- Construction Skills (<https://www.sqa.org.uk/sqa/94698.html>);
- Engineering (<https://www.sqa.org.uk/sqa/31441.html>), into which some renewable energy has been embedded;
- Hospitality (<https://www.sqa.org.uk/sqa/31584.html>), which of course includes front of house skills etc.

For such courses, a key element is ensuring relevant local work-based placements for pupils, e.g. in local hotels and restaurants for hospitality.

There are in fact many obvious local partners to develop further tailored pathways into employment for pupils. The next sections provide evidence from Propagate and the experience of the Galloway Glens Initiative. Here is an offer from another dynamic company within the renewable energy sector, Natural Power Consultants (NPC) (see Case Study 7 in the Appendices):

NPC is willing to work with local young people to help them to move into the Renewables sector, either through relevant courses at local further and higher education institutions, or through the introduction of a skills pathway. A skills pathway could help young people from the area to study for qualifications which were more directly relevant to the skills needed by local employers. NPC has already been in touch with Castle Douglas/Dalry Secondary Schools and Kirkcudbright Academy.

To illustrate that developing a locally relevant curriculum is already happening in a variety of different places, not just in the Outer Hebrides, Education Scotland highlighted the work of the Cowes Enterprise College in the Isle of Wight around its maritime curriculum. The Glenkens is a part of Dumfries and Galloway which is not coastal, but the box on Cowes further illustrates what can be achieved through curriculum innovation within a school environment. And the college has produced a how to guide on designing a careers driven and local context curriculum (see [here](#)).

Cowes Enterprise College, a secondary school academy in the Isle of Wight, has sought to create a broad and sustainable curriculum that is anchored in their local maritime context, which they call Maritime Futures. It includes teaching curriculum subjects through immersion in maritime topics, for example design and build of model boats in design technology using concepts taught in science; looking at migration by sea and a case study of the Mary Rose in history; and, in geography, studying containerisation, coastal defences and tourism in the local context. Local employers and maritime experts routinely deliver lessons, and pupils become engaged in the interactive and practical learning. Maritime Futures has increased attainment and motivation among pupils, and instilled a sense of place, changing “their perspective of where they are living from backwater to centre stage”.

The Academy is currently working on designing a specific accredited maritime course for those pupils who find the above maritime projects interesting. Maritime Futures also seeks to create positive associations with local economic opportunities, with students having encounters with local employers and job opportunities. And these do not only include standard maritime careers. In history, for example, the pupils have learnt alongside professional curators and conservators, and heard from a professional shipwreck diver.

The College has created a series of resources to inform and inspire others, including an introduction on their website (see [here](#)), a case study of Maritime Futures and its impacts (see [here](#)) and the how to guide on designing a careers driven and local context curriculum (see [here](#))

In concluding this section, it is critical to point to the evidence from the Outer Hebrides, the Isle of Wight and elsewhere that a focus on practical and vocational qualifications relevant to the local economy is not a recommendation for the traditional two-tier educational system, with some pursuing more academic subjects and others more vocational qualifications. Any vocational provision must be nationally recognised and accredited with parity of esteem so that it does not become seen as the place for the less able. Indeed, many of these qualifications can lead on to excellent employment opportunities in sectors that are important for the future.

In terms of parity of esteem, the crofting course in the Outer Hebrides, for example, is perceived as being on a par with biology applied in a locally relevant context. With such parity of esteem, these qualifications are equally relevant to all pupils, even if the focus is skewed toward local employability. If the accreditation levels stand equally alongside a more traditional offer, it means that for young people who are likely to go on to Higher Education, the offer is still relevant for them and contributes to them recognising that the area they grew up is a place to return to. Some pupils on the crofting course have gone on to gain their PhD and returned to the islands, have become Vice Chair of the local agricultural committee and office bearer of the livestock committee, all rooted in their community, and contributing to the local community.

Example 3: Offering wider curriculum choices in small schools (Shetland and e-Sgoil)

One of the challenges that small schools may confront is offering a wide subject offering for pupils. It is clear that in the Glenkens some parents have chosen to send their children to other schools because they provide wider subject choices.

We specifically discussed this with two very different small secondary schools who have successfully developed personalised choices for their pupils. The evidence demonstrates that a flexible and can-

do approach by the school management can in fact deliver significant personalisation of pupil choices across a wide range of subjects, especially when sharing teachers with other neighbouring schools, supplemented with on-line provision also.

So an exclusive focus on “efficiency”, that would argue that it is inefficient financially to offer subjects for very small pupil numbers, may be partly misplaced, based in particular on comparisons with urban schools with larger classes. A small rural secondary school can offer a wide choice of subjects, but each year it will deliver only those subjects that pupils actually choose – fulfilling pupil personalisation and choice. This delivers an effective and desirable personalised educational offering for individual pupils without the need to allocate resources to those subjects not chosen by the specific cohort of pupils.

Baltasound Junior High School in Shetland (see Case Study 3 in the Appendices) offers English and Maths, three sciences, two social sciences, music and art, home economics and technical subjects (including IT). Modern languages are also possible through e-learning. The school shares some teachers with secondary schools on other islands, and each year the Head Teacher at Baltasound spends significant time and energy timetabling classes based on pupil choices that year. This is done in a public space, so that pupils see the HT doing it, and even make suggestions.

Key features of this approach are flexibility and the determination to make things work. When numbers are small, the school may combine classes (e.g. teaching chemistry to S3 and S4 pupils in the same class). One year the school added a computer game development course in computer science, based on the aspirations of the specific cohort of pupils that year.

If there are gaps in teaching provision, then the school will find a way round. Currently they don't have a teacher trained in Home Economics, but a teacher is delivering the subject supported by other Home Economics teachers elsewhere to ensure alignment with SQA accreditation. When the school was without a technical teacher, they used e-Sgoil (the only time they have done this). And if a pupil is very keen to do a different subject than those on offer, the school will seek to be really flexible to make it work. This has happened for example in the case of a pupil who wanted to study Modern Studies. On another occasion a subject choice for one pupil could simply not be timetabled, but they had the ability to pursue this choice through self-study, and the school allocated support from a qualified teacher in that subject. The Head Teacher commented,

I have a relative who works in a big secondary school in England, even with some large subjects running identical classes in different rooms at the same time. There is no tailoring, no flexibility, no ability to go off on an interesting tangent. They don't even know all the names of their pupils.

Many of our former pupils are still in touch with the school. Very few pupils don't do well here, and then excel when they move to Lerwick in S5. Most continue the trajectory from their junior secondary. All the pupils are given a lot of responsibility at a young age. They take personal responsibility and become effective contributors.

Obviously such flexibility requires a flexible allocation of human resources, which may be challenging for a small school by itself and for D&G Council as their employer. However, in the case of Dalry Secondary, for example, the school is currently linked with Castle Douglas Secondary, which is very important to deliver a full choice of subjects.

In addition, web-based learning can further widen what subjects are offered and delivered. One of the original purposes of e-Sgoil in the Outer Hebrides was to ensure that (a) all pupils across the islands would be given the same subject offering, not just those in the largest school in Stornoway, and that (b) all pupils would have access to more specialised subjects that might be taught in person in any one

of the four secondary schools (see Case Study 1 in the Appendices). Obviously it took significant resources to develop e-Sgoil, which now earns some of its income from providing services beyond the Outer Hebrides. However, offering wider choices through e-Sgoil to pupils across the four secondary schools within the Outer Hebrides is not resource intensive once the technology platform is in place. A key success factor is simply coordinating timetabling across the four schools to allow pupils in different schools to share the same class times.

As Anne Paterson said at the July event on Education and Learning in the Glenkens, “Distance learning and technology is available but has not yet been capitalised on. It could work by digitally pooling classes so that young people can take subjects with their peers in other schools whilst physically present in their local school.” This only requires the support of a non-specialised teacher for pupils in those schools joining on-line.

Example 4: Rethinking local food (Propagate)

Like renewable energy, regenerative food production, as well as sustainable management of soil, are also critical for the climate and biodiversity. And skills around food production are vital for a sustainable future: local food production that contributes to sustainability, food security, health and nutrition, and reduces food miles. These topics align with the predominantly rural region of Dumfries and Galloway.

In terms of delivering opportunities in these subjects for pupils, local partnerships are once again key. There is already an active local social enterprise, Propagate, committed to “rethinking local food”. The Galloway Food Hub, set up by Propagate, is already stimulating demand and awareness of local food (see Case Study 9 in the Appendices).

Through Propagate there are existing opportunities that could provide pathways for young people into work that can directly address the climate and biodiversity emergencies. These opportunities could also use land around schools, for example around Dalry School, while Propagate’s own small market garden can host workshops and training days.

Some of the learning and other programmes available through Propagate that could be co-delivered in partnership with local schools are:

- *Cultivate* - 'grow your own' programme with 8 sessions on learning about organic veg production.
- *Veg Power* - developed to link veg growing with healthier cooking. Profiles a 'veg of the week' each week over 10 weeks, and looks at food systems and food justice. The course signposts to Food Hygiene training, and so leads towards a number of progression pathways around growing, preparing, food hygiene and hospitality.
- *Permaculture* design courses and *Growing Food in Small Spaces* which are linked with the UK 'Children in Permaculture' project.

In terms of accreditation for engaging in such learning opportunities, again there is the menu of rural skill qualifications at SQA which could easily be aligned to the skill set and delivery partners in agriculture, horticulture and permaculture in the local area. The previous example of rural skills at Breadalbane Academy is instructive, where the course lead ensures that whatever learning and work the pupils deliver is aligned with the SQA qualification, to ensure that the pupils not only learn and share valuable skills but gain recognition for their skills through an accredited qualification.

Example 5: The Interns Project under the Galloway Glens Initiative

The first examples of relevant models have focused on learning opportunities within schools. The Galloway Glens Initiative's interns project ('Galloway Rural Skills', see Case Study 6 in the Appendices), provided opportunities for young people beyond school, providing pathways into work through a programme of internship/work experience positions: 15 roles were supported over 4 years.

Key to the success of the programme were the partnerships with the local employers who hosted the interns. These included a couple of large employers, Drax and Natural Power Consultants, but also smaller employers: Galloway Fisheries Trust, GCAT/Catstrand, Crichton Carbon Centre (an environmental charity), Carsphairn Community Woodland, Czernin-Kinsky Scottish Company Ltd (a family-run forestry company), Mr Pooks restaurant as well as the Better Lives Partnership.

These internships were full-time and paid for 6 months with 50% funding intervention. Two of the roles supported were subsequently extended for a further six months.

The Galloway Rural Skills project had a number of aims, some directly linked to addressing depopulation:

- to provide work and training opportunities;
- to give young people a chance to see what it was like to work in Dumfries and Galloway;
- to illustrate the range of heritage-related and other careers available in the region;
- to address the current departure rate of young people;
- to introduce a new range of employers to the benefits of internships/work experience programmes.

Beyond the selected candidates, the approach and overall programme sought to take every opportunity to highlight the merits to young people of working and living in Galloway. Later roles were advertised on the *indeed.com* website. This advertised the role but also advertised the concept of working in Galloway, raising the profile of the range of careers available. It was hoped that even people who didn't apply would start to think about Galloway as an attractive place to work

The Galloway Glens Team were keen that the interns weren't simply taken on for basic duties, essentially just at a subsidised rate. Hosts were therefore asked to make the internships as rewarding as possible, with maximum benefit for intern future employment. A strong and active approach to recruitment was vital to the success of the intern programme.

At least 9 out of the 15 interns have continued working in the sector of their internship:

- 3 secured a permanent role with the host, and 2 more a subsequent role with the host.
- 2 secured a permanent or subsequent role in the sector, but not in D&G.
- 1 entered further education in the sector of the internship.
- 1 was able to continue independent self-employed work.

Example 6: Enterprising Young People in the Outer Hebrides

The D&G Council Plan for 2023-28 confirms that 98.8% of all businesses in D&G are micro (below 10 employees) or small (below 50). The case study from the Western Isles in the Appendices also points to the critical importance of micro-enterprise within a local rural or island economy. In so-called 'remote' rural areas the vast majority of enterprises are in fact micro-enterprises (although the Glenkens does have a noticeable number of small or larger enterprises based in the area).

Engaging with work opportunities through micro-enterprise can be more challenging, with many micro-entrepreneurs struggling to provide apprenticeships, even though these are critically important for sustaining, for example, local trades and local farming. The Galloway Glens initiative, which adopted a very flexible and can-do approach, is a good example of what a focused but flexible partnership with smaller local enterprises can deliver.

The D&G Council Plan also states that the region experienced 420 new start-up businesses in 2022. Fostering and sustaining micro-enterprise, including the most micro with no or only a few employees, as well as community and social enterprise, is a key strategy for the sustainability of rural communities, and needs to be reflected in rural education provision.

A broad base of private, public, third sector and community enterprises is more resilient than being dependent on just one or two larger employers, who may bring inward investment and offer multiple jobs in one sweep, but such external investment can be fickle. In a global market, cheaper labour elsewhere will pull the plug in a relatively short time after start-up funds have been swallowed up.

One strategy that can contribute to a broad base of enterprise within the local area is effective enterprise education and support that could enable some young people to set up their own business. There have long been a range of enterprise programmes which have enabled school pupils to trial setting up an enterprise, including in the Outer Hebrides.

However, the Education Department in partnership with the local social enterprise, Cothrom, delivering adult education, co-designed and delivered the Enterprising Young Peoples programme that linked exploring enterprise opportunities with local economic literacy (see Case Study 1 in the Appendices). Over a few years, day-long workshops were delivered to every senior phase pupil across the Outer Hebrides, in which every pupil set out and presented an enterprising idea, whether private businesses, social enterprises or community projects. Because the workshops enabled pupils to understand the local economy and identify local enterprising opportunities, all the ideas they came up with were very strongly rooted within the local context.

While the programme provided some follow-up through coaching for those young people who wanted to take their ideas forward into practice, this element was never adequately resourced. At the same time, the impact of the programme was not so much short-term, found in how many pupils implemented their enterprising ideas (very few, not least because all were still at school), but more likely to be long-term. When each participating pupil presented their idea at the end of the day, and got positive feedback from community representatives, the overwhelming impact was the sense of just how many good enterprising opportunities there were within the local economy.

It is very difficult to determine the contribution of the many different initiatives over more than two decades that have led Uist and Barra in the Outer Hebrides to experience the largest number within any Scottish islands of young people returning in their 20s and 30s. However, the Enterprising Young People's programme, which was delivered to more cohorts in Uist and Barra than elsewhere, has contributed, by demonstrating to young people that there are so many opportunities they could return to in the future, should they wish to.

Example 7: Life-long learning within the community (Uist and Denmark)

Example 2 above sets out evidence on the progress made in the Outer Hebrides to develop qualifications and pathways relevant to the local economy. It is equally important to recognise other contributing factors that have delivered life-long learning opportunities in particular (see Case Study 1 in the Appendices).

Like many other rural areas in Scotland, Uist (the seven inhabited islands from Berneray to Eriskay in the Outer Hebrides) has benefited from learning opportunities provided through a local college, Lews Castle College (LCC), now part of the University of the Highlands and Islands (UHI). LCC's learning centre in Benbecula next door to the secondary school provided opportunities for young people and adults to engage in further and higher education, and at times extended the curriculum offer for senior phase pupils by taking courses at the centre, courses that were not taught in the school.

What is more distinctive to Uist is the extent of life-long learning opportunities developed by the community sector over the last 30 years. Cothrom, a charitable adult learning centre was initially set up in 1992 to help women back into work, a mission that ensured a long-term commitment to childcare, including eventually the creation of Cothrom's own Gaelic-speaking nursery. Another full-day all year round nursery was established by a community organisation in North Uist as well; this has now been absorbed into the new primary school built for North Uist.

Over the years Cothrom has developed a wide range of life-long learning opportunities for adults, with a strong focus on learning and support services for young people and adults facing challenges in their lives. Accredited qualifications included SQA qualifications in horticulture, delivered in partnership with another community organisation, Tagsa Uibhist. The collaboration has contributed to a significant expansion of local horticulture. Tagsa developed the largest community growing project in Uist, which was managed for a time by three graduates from the first cohort of the horticulture course.⁵ And it was the partnership between the local council's Education Department and Cothrom that delivered the Enterprising Young People's programme (see Example 6 above).

Taigh Chearsabhagh, the arts and heritage centre set up in 1994, has long collaborated closely with LCC (now UHI) to deliver art courses at further and higher education level, recently being able to teach a full BA. The primary inspiration for art at Taigh Chearsabhagh has always been the distinct island environment. And the local community riding school offered accredited qualifications in equestrian studies.

Most recently, the Gaelic music and culture organisation within the community, Ceòlas, first set up in 1996 to run an annual summer school, entered into partnership with UHI. They jointly built a £7 million cultural centre, Cnoc Soilleir. This was opened in 2022 and now delivers community-based courses and events in Gaelic language, music and culture, as well courses accredited by UHI, including resident academic staff in music and in archaeology.

Gaelic music, dance and culture have in fact long been part of community-based learning, including for young people through the two annual feisean (one in South Uist, one in North Uist, both targeted at children, with many of the tutors being young people themselves), as well as a range of local dance schools.

⁵ For more detail on the emergence of a multi-pronged and integrated strategy, led by Tagsa Uibhist, to start rebuilding a local food economy in Uist, see the CoDeL case study at <http://codel.scot/community-actions-in-uist-and-glenkens>, which also includes three case studies from the Glenkens.

The evidence highlights two important characteristics of these educational opportunities delivered through the community sector. First is their organic growth over many years, with community organisations responding to needs as well as opportunities as they arose within local communities. Second is the extent of partnerships, among different community organisations, between these organisations and the local college delivering further and higher education, and also with the local council. The Enterprising Young People's programme was delivered through an innovative partnership agreement between local council and community organisation as equal partners equally responsible for all outcomes, rather than a typical Service Level Agreement or equivalent, in which the commissioning authority holds much of the power.

There are of course many different models to deliver life-long learning in rural communities. An example of a very different model is the folk high school in Denmark (see Case Study 5), a non-formal residential school offering learning opportunities in almost any subject. Most students are between 18 and 24 years old and the length of a typical stay is four months. It is a boarding school, so students sleep, eat, study, and spend their spare time at the school. There are no academic requirements for admittance, and there are no exams - but students do get a diploma as proof of their attendance.

One of the core ideas of the folk high schools is equality and mutual learning between teachers and students. Everybody has the same duties and the same rights. Classes are characterised by the free word, dialogue and an open curriculum which can be changed during the course. The main focus is to discover and strengthen the unique skills of each student in a challenging yet supportive social atmosphere. "The task of the schools is to create a climate where culture is a reality."

There are approximately 70 independent folk high schools located all over Denmark, offering learning opportunities in more than 300 different subjects. Every year in Denmark, an average of 40,000 people attend a folk high school for courses of varying lengths.

Conclusions: looking forward

Key principles emerging from this review

Some key themes have emerged from both the secondary research and the case studies, which this section draws out as a series of principles that are important for the delivery of rural education. (To make the principles support a broader framework for policy and action, additional principles have been included, around creativity, inclusiveness and digital skills which were discussed in meetings with the Steering Group for this research, but which were not a focus of the primary and secondary research gathered for this report.)

Educational provision needs to ...

- be rooted and connected in the place, drawing on local assets, connections, networks and partnerships, and incorporating local experience and knowledge, including experience and skills in adapting rapidly to changing circumstances. The last is essential for the resilience of rural communities and in preparing young people for jobs in the future that have not yet been conceived.⁶ Educational provision needs to demonstrate in practice, from nursery through

⁶ Tapping into the resilience that rural communities so often display will strengthen young people's own resilience within a fast changing world, whether they stay or move away. The focus on what works well locally is therefore good for young people wherever they may eventually end up.

further and higher education to life-long learning, that it values local assets and strengths, experience and knowledge.

- A better education that is rooted locally also strengthens young people’s ability to choose where to go. So education provision needs to value and support local communities and their sustainability, e.g. giving young people education and learning that delivers genuine choices and opportunities, equipping them to go anywhere, whether they stay, leave or a combination of both, rather than only “learning to leave”.
- deliver to the needs of the local economy; and provide opportunities for young people and those engaged in life-long learning to meet those needs through learning that links to the local labour market and local community action.⁷ This principle relates not just to the local economy as is, but also enabling young people to identify enterprising opportunities that (a) enable them to forge their own paths and (b) address needs that are currently not being met within the local area, or society more widely.
- support creativity, which is critical for young people and adults to respond to and demonstrate resilience in the face of the rapid changes like climate change that all of us are facing, and will continue to do so in future.⁸
- be inclusive, meeting the needs of all. This includes provision of education and learning for those with diverse and special needs, and can build on the strengths of small schools where diverse pupils may often be taken at ‘face value’ without stigmatisation or labelling.
- give young people the opportunity to apply and develop their digital skills so that they can thrive in an increasingly digital world, but also practice skills for adaptability in the face of rapid change and uncertainty, e.g. about the impacts of AI on future work. Intergenerational work, with young people helping adults in their community to acquire better digital skills can bring mutual benefit, including valuing the digital skills that many young people already have.
- urgently needs to adapt learning and practice to the demands made by the twin climate and biodiversity emergencies, equipping young people and adults with the necessary knowledge, experience and skills to live more sustainably. These are diverse, for example ranging from technical skills for renewable energy through growing local food to social capital for community resilience.

⁷ Relevant strategies can include, as some examples, using local assets as educational resources (see Examples 1 and 4 above), delivering accredited qualifications that relate directly to local labour markets but are recognised nationally (see Example 2 above), and providing relevant life-long learning opportunities (see Example 7).

⁸ The following are comments from Andreas Schleicher, OECD Director for the Directorate of Education and Skills and Special Advisor on Education Policy to the Secretary-General at OECD in an [Education Scotland podcast](#) (7 March 2024): “We found that, across the board, everywhere where we looked at this, 15-year-olds were less creative than 10-year-olds.” “Our education systems destroy some of the capabilities that are innate to us as humans ... this kind of compliance-based, conformity driven culture in education drives out some of the creativity that in early childhood develops very naturally.” “There’s a more global trend towards more project-based learning where students set their own goals and have to become good at monitoring their own learning progress. What we all know that in the world of today it’s not what you do in school – it’s your motivations, your capacity to continue learning throughout life on your own, to organise yourself, to have that inner resilience that’s increasingly important.”

An emerging vision for educational provision in the Glenkens

In this report we have set out relevant secondary research, concrete examples of positive action elsewhere that deliver effective education within rural communities, and some broad principles that can frame educational provision in rural areas. An important strand of the research was also to hear the views and voices of local people within the Glenkens itself, who have the direct experience of education in the area.

Such engagement was facilitated through two community sessions (involving parents, current and former pupils and teachers), as well as conducting interviews with some community representatives, all in September 2024. These sessions facilitated local voices and information sharing that have been included in sections of this report. What was also apparent was the commitment and passion for education that was shared among the participants from the Glenkens, and the depth of relevant knowledge and experience, insight and aspiration within local communities.

The sessions focused on direct experiences of local education, in the past and the present, and aspirations for the future. The latter led to the emergence of ideas for a vision for education provision in the Glenkens, and the following diagram seeks to capture some of the elements of the vision.

The short sessions did not allow the creation of fully integrated visions within and across the two sessions, and to ensure that all participant voices are heard, we have included two Appendices (11 and 12), one of our notes while participants were contributing their ideas verbally, and the other of what each participant themselves recorded on paper.

Clearly parents, pupils and other stakeholders wanted to see an educational hub or campus at the heart of communities in the Glenkens, for rural place-based learning from cradle to grave. The hub would not just be located in one building, but also have mobile elements that can take educational provision out into communities.

The obvious core of such provision are the current primary and secondary school in Dalry. The vision seeks to demonstrate a positive and sustainable future for those schools as part of a wider educational offering that can sustain high-quality and innovative educational provision, relevant to the local area, at the heart of the Glenkens.

An essential part of a vision relevant to the local area would be to develop a centre of excellence with a special focus on giving young people the opportunity to develop essential rural skills, especially skills for the land-based and renewable energy sectors, enabling young people who want to stay, or those who leave, to return later.

Some of the examples or models from elsewhere cited in the previous sections of this report would be highly relevant for developing such a centre of excellence. What is striking in fact is how much those positive examples or models from elsewhere align with the vision from within the local community in the Glenkens.

making strong, viable & healthy community
good place for families
encouraging new generations to stay, or come, and thrive
people can leave, but not forced to

Inclusive, accessible, safe
Opportunities for all
For all ages and abilities
Everyone encouraged to learn, but not necessarily academic

I know that anything is possible
I can be who I want to be
I feel safe and supported, and confident in my chosen path

Child / person specific
Flexible, including flexi-schooling
Individual pathways
Challenging, and happy to learn
Mentoring and self-directed learning

Learning / Wellbeing Hub / Campus

... in centre of community

... from cradle to grave, so that people do not have to leave

... life-long & intergenerational learning

Wide selection of subjects
Traditional and modern skills
Practical skills and academic options
Apprenticeships & local job opportunities
Outdoor learning & non-traditional settings
On-line learning with cutting-edge technology to expand choice; also mobile options to take learning into community
Rural skills and trades brought back
Practical skills for life
Community contributing to skills teaching
"Past skills for future communities"

After-school clubs & activities outside teaching time
Sports, arts, crafts, growing food
Entertainment & social opportunities, as well as learning

Rooted within community
with local decision-making and control, devolution

drawing on what is already there; there is so much going on locally and nature on doorstep

People come in and children go out

"Small" that enables ...
Nurturing, support, kindness
Sense of belonging
Everyone getting on with each other, both peers and across ages
Everyone valued
Children managing mental health
Not hierarchical, different relationship btw teachers & pupils

Eco-sustainable buildings
Renewable energy
Self-sufficiency
Great food, locally sourced; some prepared by children
Resources from windfarms
Good transport

Is the ambitious vision practical and achievable?

A critical question is whether such a vision for an educational hub, a centre of excellence, is practical and achievable. The evidence from the views of multiple stakeholders captured in this review, and from the research and documentation reviewed, suggests it is practical. In fact it meets the needs and aspirations of (a) the communities within the Glenkens, (b) key private sector actors and (c) the Dumfries and Galloway council.

For local communities critical elements include educational provision that is local, avoiding potentially very long bus journeys; that is able to meet the needs and aspirations of individual pupils effectively; that delivers opportunities for life-long learning; and that, not least, contributes to repopulation within the Glenkens by helping to make the area a great place to live and work, for young people and families to stay, return or settle. As the Glenkens Hub argues on education and learning (see [here](#)):

The provision of high-quality education for our young people and learning opportunities for our whole community is a key under-pinning of thriving communities here in the Glenkens. We know that lack of provision leads to families leaving the area, which is completely at odds with our aims of achieving sustainable communities through averting de-population.

Locally-based private businesses, many operating in land-based activities like renewable energy and forestry, want skilled individuals whom they can recruit locally, knowing that will lead to greater employee retention, rather than being forced to bring in (often expensive temporary) workers from outside. And recruitment gaps for local businesses are found across the board, including among local community organisations and social enterprises.

Despite The Green House in Dalry being Natural Power Consultants' head office, recruiting staff to the Glenkens with the right skills and experience is a challenge. Across the board, the renewables industry is growing rapidly because of the move towards Net Zero, and companies are struggling to recruit from an insufficient pool of potential candidates. (See Case Study 7 in the Appendices)

And the Education and Learning Directorate within Dumfries and Galloway Council aspires to

improve education and learning opportunities to help all our children, young people and citizens fulfil their potential. This starts with pre-school, then school, before progressing into further or higher education or transition into work. We will work with our partners to create and promote lifelong learning opportunities so everyone in the region can live a meaningful and fulfilling life, and contribute to their community.” (D&G Council Plan for 2023-28)

The vision for educational provision in the Glenkens directly addresses these aspirations, and links very closely with the Rural Skills Training Centre being developed with funding from D&G Council and South of Scotland Enterprise (SOSE). The SQA qualifications in rural skills are particularly relevant to the Glenkens, and the Rural Skills Centre could provide significant opportunities for collaboration between local schools and the wider community.

Depopulation across Dumfries and Galloway, which is almost all rural, remains one of the biggest challenges confronting the Council. The emerging vision provides a positive response that could deliver an innovative and effective strategy to turn around depopulation in rural areas, delivered through partnership working across the community, private and public sectors. It would deliver pathways to work opportunities that enable young people, and their families, to stay, return or settle in the area. With very strong links to rural skills and land-based activities, the vision can also evolve to include a centre of excellence for learning within the community that directly addresses the challenges of the climate and biodiversity emergencies.

With the distinct mix of a highly active community within the Glenkens, many local employers and enterprises, including local trusts, from large to small, and a local Council aspiring to find positive and sustainable solutions, there can be few better areas within D&G than the Glenkens to develop and demonstrate such an innovative educational strategy that directly addresses depopulation and climate challenges, that delivers the sustainability for local rural communities that is critical if rural areas across D&G are going to survive and thrive. The strategy could develop an innovative partnership, rooted in the Glenkens as a place, that demonstrates best practice in responding to the challenges of rural depopulation and the climate emergency, enabling it to attract attention and funding for its ambitions.

It would also be recognised under the Scottish Government's Rural Delivery Plan, and its Action Plan to address depopulation. The Plan "endorses the importance of local leadership and seeks to exemplify the maxim 'local by default, national by agreement'. We know that a place-based approach to applying national, regional, and local policies will be essential to sustainably and effectively address depopulation."

Assets and strengths that can contribute to the realisation of the emerging vision

The emerging vision is sufficiently coherent and accords with the needs and aspirations of all sectors that it could act as a sound starting point for collaboration. Critical for success would be to build on existing assets and strengths within the community and area. This research has identified many of these.

Assets and strengths within the community sector ...

The Glenkens is fortunate to have highly active communities, with a plethora of active community organisations (see [here](#)). These include organisations and trusts with significant experience in community ownership of assets and engaging constructively with local windfarms. They also include organisations focused on local heritage, local land and natural assets, including the Carsphairn Community Woodland that is developing the Rural Skills Training Centre. And of course many of these community organisations themselves require skilled employees.

Activities across the area are coordinated under the Glenkens and District Community Action Plan (see [here](#)), with its four key themes of a *Connected Community*, an *Asset Rich Community*, an *Economically Flourishing Community* and a *Carbon Neutral Community*. The Plan is being progressed through an organisational structure for effective delivery, governance and accountability shared across the Glenkens and District Trust, the Glenkens Community and Arts Trust and the Glenkens & District Community Action Plan Steering Group.

In addition to a highly active and organised community, families and communities within the Glenkens have long had a very strong commitment to education. This is evidenced in:

- the very high educational attainment of Dalry Secondary School in the past;
- the significant local experience in delivering alternative educational provision, for example at Kilquhanity School (since the 1940s) (see Case Study 5 in the Appendices);
- the determination with which local communities have fought school closures, such as Carsphairn primary school and Dalry secondary;
- the expertise in establishing groups like Bairn Banter (see Case Study 10 in the Appendices), including a deep commitment to developing outdoor educational provision for children;

- the high levels of flexible schooling currently exercised by parents in the Glenkens;
- the active and dynamic parent councils in the area.

This strong commitment was clearly reflected in the attendance at the sessions CoDeL facilitated in September, and in the ambitious vision that emerged.

Assets and strengths within the private and enterprise sector ...

Many of the key sectors within the local economy are land-based, including agriculture, forestry and renewable energy, with a range of businesses, from micro to large. The hospitality and tourism sectors are also important. And the community sector is a critical part of the local economy too, not just delivering vital services, but also providing employment in community enterprises and charities. (For a list of many local businesses see [here](#).)

There are significant local employers with an interest in local education and learning. These include, for example, Natural Power Consultants Ltd and Vattenfall Wind Power, who presented at the event on Education and Learning in the Glenkens in July 2024, setting out their needs for skilled workers to recruit (see Case Studies 7 and 8 in the Appendices).

Young people in the Glenkens struggle to see a future for themselves in the area because of limited job opportunities. Lack of higher education facilities in the area is also a challenge for employers like Natural Power Consultants who normally recruit at graduate level

South West Engineering and Fabrications Ltd is a good example of a local small business employing 15 employees, including many local people. However, they face recruitment gaps as well, especially in critical skills like fabrication and welding, and a fifth of their workforce comes from abroad.

There are no shortages of local businesses, whether private or community, micro or larger, that can contribute to enriching educational provision in the Glenkens by highlighting opportunities, sharing experience, contributing to elements of the curriculum, and offering opportunities for work experience and internships, apprenticeships and jobs (see Case Study 6 for some examples).

Critical for the success of delivering on the emerging vision will be larger businesses, potentially including windfarms (such as Vattenfall), that might also contribute financial and other resources, not just work opportunities.

Assets and strengths within the public sector ...

Dumfries and Galloway has a long history of delivering rural education, including through a multitude of small schools, as well as supporting diverse and dynamic schools, especially at secondary school level, that create their own particular ethos and distinct educational provision, and even compete with each other to attract pupils. Within some schools there is a strong tradition of partnership; we have already cited the example of the forestry classroom at Dalbeattie High School funded by a large local forestry machinery suppliers and engineers. The Education and Learning Directorate at D&G Council is also very supportive of parental choice, for example with many parents sending their children to schools outwith their catchment areas and exercising their rights to flexi-schooling.

In addition, implementing the vision would also contribute to other themes at the core of the D&G Council Plan for 2023-28: the economy; health and wellbeing; and travel, connectivity and infrastructure, as well as the first principle of “securing our future” through “addressing the climate

emergency” and “protecting our natural capital”. With a skewed demographic across rural D&G, recruiting people to deliver health and social care will remain critical.

The emerging vision for an educational hub within the Glenkens clearly fits very well within the Council’s overall framework of ambition and delivery for the area. The educational hub would also fit well into wider regional and national policy. This includes SOSE’s strategy to support the South of Scotland’s communities, environment and economy. SOSE has already invested in the Carsphairn Community Wood, for example, which is now developing the Rural Skills Training Centre.

Obviously, more work is required on the vision and a huge amount of detail would need to be worked through among all the relevant partners. This will require discussion and negotiation among partners over time, perhaps with some facilitation, or even appointing a Development Officer, to develop the vision and implementation strategy in greater detail.

It is likely to be unrealistic, in the current financial climate, to attract large funding all at once to create the educational hub or campus envisaged in the vision. Instead it will have to develop on the basis of incremental and organic growth over many years.

A note on housing

Developing educational provision, and opportunities for local employment cannot be delivered effectively in isolation. Affordable housing must be a critical part of the mix.

This is deeply relevant to the Glenkens. Recently two families with pupils at Dalry have had to move out of their existing homes and have been unable to find alternative homes in the catchment area. The community also knows that existing housing has been bought up by wind and power generation companies when they develop new infrastructure, removing such housing from the market. And there are individuals and families who are living in temporary accommodation and caravans for long periods.

Even though this review has focused on rural education, it cannot ignore the challenge of available and affordable housing, especially when housing is lost to developers, incoming retirees and holiday homes. The lack of housing is deeply undermining potential school rolls and also, of course, the ability of young people and families to take up work opportunities in the local labour market.

Much of the vision and the educational strategies that are reflected in this report cannot be realised unless the local housing crisis is also addressed. A strong action plan relating to housing needs to be taken up within the Glenkens and District Community Action Plan to complement the development of high-quality local educational provision.

Reflections on options for education in the Glenkens

Key decisions about secondary school provision in Dalry will be taking place in the next couple of years and these will deeply affect the viability of the community vision that is emerging. So some next steps for Dalry may be critical at this moment in time.

The Glenkens Education Forum, under the Glenkens & District Community Action Plan Steering Group, and with the support of GCAT, will need to reflect on the emerging vision and decide how to take developing the vision and strategy forward. Critical to these community discussions will be bringing the various public and private sector organisations on board, to see the opportunity for an education centre of excellence that includes a specialist focus on land-based and renewable energy skills.

While decisions about the continuation of Dalry Secondary School or not will have very little immediate impacts on D&G's overall education budget (the total cost of the school represents only just over 1% of the total educational budget), they will have very serious consequences for educational provision in local communities throughout the Glenkens. The closure of Dalry Secondary is likely to undermine the positive vision and opportunity that has emerged during this research.

A few participants at the community sessions proposed the idea of establishing an independent school in Dalry in partnership with the private sector alone. We believe it is unrealistic for local communities within the Glenkens to deliver on this. Communities in the Glenkens are already highly active in many different activities across the area; and, to be successful, huge energy and resources would have to be invested in developing an independent school, detracting from those other initiatives. We have also spoken to an independent school with a specialist educational focus. Even with Government finance for places, the school still has to raise very significant additional funding every year to be able to deliver their educational offering; an independent school in Dalry would face similar challenges on an annual basis. Finally, the vision for an educational hub in the Glenkens in fact goes beyond what a small independent school could offer.

The decision has been taken not to mothball the school this year, and a new Head Teacher for Castle Douglas and Dalry is working energetically to ensure good educational provision at Dalry Secondary School. For example, he is working hard on curriculum offering, additional opportunities such as Duke of Edinburgh awards, and establishing local partnerships. Also helpful in the short term would be to introduce one or two new courses aligned with local employability opportunities, and the HT is already looking at such opportunities. This could illustrate the direction of travel and test demand from within the Glenkens community.

Overall this report provides evidence and examples that can assist all involved to determine a positive path forward for local education to benefit the Glenkens communities in the longer term. To fully utilise the evidence and examples, people need to have time to digest and consider them and to discuss in detail what can realistically be achieved and delivered. In view of the long-term implications of closing a school, we would encourage all involved to take the time to look at options and to debate and discuss them in an open and respectful way before taking such a major step. This process will take time, but premature decisions to close the school without a full assessment of the implications, opportunities and possible mitigation measures will severely hamper the longer term sustainability of all the communities in the Glenkens.

Concluding remarks

Looking at the national and local policy context, at the focus on mitigating the risks of rural depopulation and at the passion for education and community development within the Glenkens, there is an opportunity, by working together across the public, private and community sectors, to develop rural education provision in the area that is innovative and transformational.

Such place-based education could directly address rural depopulation and climate challenges, and meet the needs of the local economy and of local communities in the present, and for the future. It could build on local assets and strengths, experience and knowledge, to create resilient rural communities, individuals and enterprises, able to adapt rapidly to the many changing circumstances that rural Scotland will increasingly face in the future.

It could “help deliver a just transition to net-zero” in the Glenkens, “by ensuring the learning system equips people with the skills and knowledge both they and the Sector require” (*Commission for the land-based learning review*, Scottish Government, 2023:1). In this way it could serve as a valuable model for other communities across Dumfries and Galloway and further afield in Scotland.

With the distinct mix of a highly active local community, many local employers and enterprises, including in the land-based and renewables sectors, and a local Council aspiring to find positive and sustainable solutions, we believe there can be few better rural areas than the Glenkens to develop and demonstrate such an educational strategy.

The strategy needs to be developed through an innovative partnership, rooted in the Glenkens as a place, that demonstrates best practice in responding to the challenges of rural depopulation, the climate emergency and thriving local economies and communities, enabling it to attract attention and funding for its ambitions.

As the Executive Manager of the Glenkens Community and Arts Trust put it at the event on education and learning in the Glenkens in July 2024,

We are looking for a creative solution based on a vision of thriving rural communities where current and future economic development is underpinned by innovative educational provision, working in strategic partnership with businesses, communities and the Council and where all parties are valued for their expertise.

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