



Val Lloyd
Chair, Petitions Committee
The National Assembly for Wales
Cardiff Bay
Cardiff
CF99 1NA

25 March 2008

Dear Val

PETITION FROM 'POWYS COMMUNITY SCHOOLS ACTION' -closure of rural schools

Thank you for your letter of 14 March regarding the Committee's consideration of the above petition. It is not Estyn's policy to provide representation in person at this Committee. Please accept this letter as my written representation to the Committee.

As the Committee is aware Estyn inspected the quality of the education service provided by Powys County Council in March 2007. In summary, the inspection report found that Powys, at the time of the inspection, had the third highest proportion of surplus school places in Wales and that not enough had been done to address this issue.

Specifically, I would draw the Committee's attention to the relevant paragraphs on access and school organisation in the inspection report:

- The authority has the third highest proportion of surplus school places in Wales and this number is rising. Its progress in addressing surplus places has been slow. (Paragraph 50)
- The backlog on the maintenance of schools is increasing. The age, nature and condition of many primary school buildings limit the range of educational facilities that can be provided in them. (Paragraph 51)
- The authority has a firm commitment to modernise its schools in order to remove surplus places and improve buildings. It has embarked on an ambitious modernisation programme and there is a good understanding of the nature of the challenge that such



a programme presents. The programme has a clear and agreed policy, and is supported by a project management approach. The authority has earmarked the funds to implement the modernisation programme. (Paragraph 52)

- There are some good prospects in the authority's work on access and school organisation, particularly as a result of the recent Board decision to implement the first stages of the school modernisation programme. However, there are many uncertainties and the authority has not had a significant impact on reducing excess places and improving buildings to date. (Paragraph 54)

The authority is rated grade 4, on a four-point scale, for its performance in access and school organisation. Grade 4 is the lowest grade which means that this aspect of the authority's work has shortcomings in important areas. However the local authority's prospects for improvement in its work on access and school organisation are grade 3, which means that it has some good prospects for improvement, but barriers in important areas need to be addressed.

A copy of the inspection report can be found on the Estyn website www.estyn.gov.uk

It may help if I explain Estyn's approach to the inspection of access and school organisation in our inspections of local authority education services where appropriate. Estyn recommends that local authorities take action to reduce spare places in order to improve school buildings and the quality of education. However, we do not tell local authorities exactly how they should go about doing this nor do we put any direct pressure on authorities to follow a particular course of action in that respect.

At no time during this inspection, did Estyn make any specific threat that the authority would receive a 'less-than-glowing' report if the authority did not move in any particular direction regarding its school organisation programme.

The inspection report certainly does not refer to the closure of any specific schools in Powys. Estyn only comments on the closure of individual schools when asked to do so by the Welsh Assembly Government in order to advise their officers about the likely educational impact of any proposed closure, amalgamation or federation.

The inspection criteria used by Estyn when making judgments about a local authority's performance over access and school places are publicly available on the Estyn website in the 'Guidance for the Local Authority Education Services in Wales from April 2006'.

The inspection criteria are agreed between Estyn, the Wales Audit Office and the Association of Directors of Education in Wales jointly. In reference to the provision of an appropriate range and number of school places, we judge whether the council has clear arrangements for the regular, pro-active review of trends across the authority and in individual schools. Further to this, we judge whether the authority is making good progress in:

- reducing the numbers of overfull schools;
- removing significant numbers of surplus places; and
- meeting the needs of the local authority

In addition, we judge the extent to which the authority links the provision of school places, asset management planning, admissions to schools and home-to-school transport are regularly reviewed and strike a conscious balance between quality of education, supporting parental choice and cost (value for money use of public funds).

I would like to take this opportunity to correct a misleading reference in the transcript of the Petitions Committee on 21 February 2008, attributed to Andrew R.T. Davis that Estyn is an executive body of the Assembly Government. The Welsh Assembly Government (WAG) funds Estyn but we are independent of WAG in terms of the management and accountability for our operational business. This means that there is no risk of political or ministerial influence affecting the evaluations and recommendations we publish in the course of any of our inspection work.

I hope that this letter has clarified the issue that you raised.

Yours sincerely



Dr Bill Maxwell

Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of
Education and Training in Wales