

Yr Is-bwyllgor Datblygu Gwledig

RDC(3)-04-08 (p1): 13 Mawrth 2008

Ystyried deiseb P-03-089 ar Ysgolion Cymunedol Powys

Diben

Mae'r papur hwn yn gwahodd yr Is-bwyllgor Datblygu Gwledig i ystyried deiseb ar Ysgolion Cymunedol Powys, a gyfeiriwyd gan y Pwyllgor Deisebau yn ei gyfarfod ar 21 Chwefror 2008.

Cefndir

2.Yn ei lythyr cyfeirio dyddiedig 27 Chwefror 2008 (Atodiad A), mae'r Pwyllgor Deisebau yn gofyn bod yr Is-bwyllgor Datblygu Gwledig a'r Pwyllgor Menter a Dysgu Gydol Oes yn ystyried rhinweddau 'Polisi Addysg Wledig' trawsbynciol.

3.Mae llythyr oddi wrth Gadeirydd y Pwyllgor Menter a Dysgu Gydol Oes at Gadeirydd yr Is-bwyllgor Datblygu Gwledig, dyddiedig 4 Mawrth 2008, (Atodiad B) yn nodi:

"Teimlaf y byddai'n well pe byddai eich pwyllgor yn trafod y mater fel rhan o'ch ymchwiliad i ddarparu gwasanaethau gwledig gan fy mod yn credu'n gryf y dylai hyfywedd cymunedau gwledig – ac yn wir hyfywedd cymunedau trefol – gael ei ystyried mewn modd holistaidd".

4.Ystyriwyd y ddeiseb (Atodiad C) gan y Pwyllgor Deisebau ar 6 Rhagfyr 2007, 17 Ionawr 2008, a 21 Chwefror 2008. Yn ei gyfarfod ar 6 Rhagfyr, cytunodd y Pwyllgor Deisebau i ofyn am ragor o wybodaeth gan y deisebwyr.

5. Ystyriodd y Pwyllgor Deisebau yr wybodaeth ychwanegol (Atodiad D) ar 17 Ionawr, a chytuno i ysgrifennu at y Gweinidog dros Blant, Addysg, Dysgu Gydol Oes a Sgiliau (Atodiad E), a chytuno ymhellach i wahodd y deisebwyr i'r Pwyllgor i gyflwyno'u dadl. Ar 21 Chwefror, ystyriodd y Pwyllgor ymateb y Gweinidog (Atodiad F), clywodd dystiolaeth gan y deisebwyr a chytuno i gyfeirio'r ddeiseb i'r Is-bwyllgor Datblygu Gwledig a'r Pwyllgor Menter a Dysgu Gydol Oes. Mae trawsgrifiad o'r cyfarfod hwn ynghlwm fel Atodiad G.

Argymhelliad

6.Gwahoddir aelodau'r Is-bwyllgor Datblygu Gwledig i ystyried y ddeiseb, y wybodaeth ychwanegol, a'r ohebiaeth sydd ynghlwm, ac i gytuno a yw am weithredu ymhellach.

Y Gwasanaeth Pwyllgorau
Mawrth 2008

(Atodiadau saesneg yn unig)

Annex A

Referral letter from Petitions Committee
Y Pwyllgor Deisebau
Petitions Committee

Alun Davies AM
Chair of the Rural Development Committee
National Assembly for Wales
Cardiff Bay
CF99 1NA

Our ref: P-03-089
27 February 2008

Dear Alun

Petition:- Powys Community Schools Action

As you are aware, Powys Community Schools Action presented evidence to the Petitions Committee on 21 February 2008. The petition they have submitted is in relation to the closure of small schools in Powys.

In light of the evidence presented, the Committee agreed to ask that both the Rural Development and the Enterprise and Learning Committees consider the merits of a cross-cutting 'Rural Education Policy'.

I look forward to your response to this request.

Yours sincerely

Val Lloyd
Chair, Petitions Committee

Annex B

Letter from Chair of EL Committee
Pwyllgor Menter a Dysgu
Enterprise and Learning Committee
Bae Caerdydd / Cardiff Bay
Caerdydd / Cardiff CF99 1NA

Alun Davies AM
Rural Development Committee Chair
National Assembly for Wales

4 March 2008

Dear Alun

Petition - Powys Community Schools - Rural Education Policy

Like me, you will have received a letter from Val Lloyd, the Chair of the Petitions Committee suggesting that the two committees chaired by us should consider the above petition jointly. I feel that it would be better for your committee to discuss the matter as part of your inquiry into rural service provision since I am of the strong opinion that the viability of rural communities - and indeed that of urban communities - should be considered in a holistic manner.

Yours very sincerely,

Gareth Jones AM
Committee Chair

CC Alun Davidson, Deputy Clerk of Petitions Committee

Annex C

Petition

Powys Community Schools Action

"We call upon the Welsh Assembly Government to sustain the communities of Powys, the most rural of Welsh counties, and to halt and reverse the pressure on Powys County Council to close the schools which are the heart of those communities."

Such is the wording of our petition. In this document we explain how and why the petition came about and what we hope to achieve. Our concerns, and the remedies we propose for them, are both broad and specific.

Our broad concern is that the communities which make up so much of this rural country feel undervalued and are constantly threatened with loss of facilities such as post offices, lavatories, local libraries and hospitals and, most vitally, schools. The services that do exist become increasingly distant.

Our specific and very immediate concern is that Powys County Council, under pressure from Estyn and from the Welsh Assembly Government, has embarked on an ill-considered panic programme of closures of community schools.

We would like to see a genuine review of the provision of services - particularly education - to rural areas, with a view to identifying cost-effective ways of sustaining communities and, at the same time, delivering some of the Welsh Assembly Government's aspirations in terms of sustainability.

Most urgently, we want to see the pressure on Powys County Council reversed, to halt the current highly destructive programme and instead to encourage a sober and wide-ranging review of educational provision across the county, area by area, in order to arrive at a positive vision. Indeed, we would hope that closure programmes initiated by any rural local authority would be put on hold pending the broad review proposed.

On the following pages we expand on these points. We sincerely hope that the Welsh Assembly Government will be able to give a sympathetic hearing to our arguments and take timely and appropriate action.

Summary

We would like to see the Welsh Assembly Government:

Recognise: the importance of rural communities to Wales; the needs of those communities for good services; the vital importance to

those communities of their schools.

Recognise the wide-ranging benefits of educating children within their own communities.

Pending a review of the issues which we raise, remove (or at least ease) the pressure placed on Powys and other local authorities which is being interpreted as a mandate to close small schools.

As a matter of urgency, require local authorities to adhere closely to existing guidance on school organisation proposals, by refusing to accept patently insincere assurances and sham or poor consultations.

As a matter of urgency, reconsider the role Estyn plays in relation to promoting school closure programmes.

Develop a rural education policy to complement the rural health policy.

Ensure that education is prominently featured in the Rural Development Committee's consideration of rural service delivery.

Review, clarify, and bring up to date guidance on school organisation proposals, strengthening it with more rigorous requirements for impact assessments in terms of language and community and, ideally, a presumption against closure of community schools.

Work with local authorities to encourage or require them to develop and implement positive and strategic visions for the provision of education (and indeed other services) as opposed to panic cost-cutting measures.

Demonstrate genuine joined-up and innovative thinking around communities, education and rural affairs, and carefully think through the likely or possible consequences of well-meaning initiatives.

Safeguard democracy by ensuring that consultations and public initiatives are genuine and not purely cosmetic.

Make sustainability (in the environmental, social and ethical sense) a central plank of all policies.

The Situation in Powys

Clearly, we are unaware of details of the Council's inner workings and of its exchanges with Estyn and the Welsh Assembly Government, so that we can only present the situation as it has been seen by schools and the public.

The Council has been aware of the issue of surplus school places for some years, but Powys is the most rural of all Welsh counties, making any kind of rationalisation a difficult and painful process. As a result, members have been reluctant to vote for closures and only two small schools have actually been closed in recent years. That was part of a rather half-hearted review undertaken by the Council which met with widespread opposition.

The Council then produced its Policy for the Organisation of Primary Schools, which favoured the creation of area schools of single year classes but accepted, with some reluctance, that some smaller schools would have to remain. Arrangements were put in place to review all primary schools in a four year cycle, starting with those scoring lowly on a combination of factors including pupil numbers and the state of their buildings. However, the policy is extremely vague about what is meant by 'review' and what should happen next.

In March of this year, coincident with the inspection of the LEA by Estyn - but not, we are quite sure, a coincidence - the Council suddenly announced its intention to close the six smallest schools, with more in the pipeline. The schools were chosen purely on the basis of numbers on roll, without reference to surplus capacity or state of buildings, and were reviewed in isolation, without reference to their context or to any broader consideration (such as the Welsh language or the needs of the wider area in which they are situated). The Council stated privately that the six were to be closed in order to 'release resources' and only then might any wider strategy be considered.

In October 2007 the Board of Powys County Council voted on the fate of these first six schools: three were to close and three decisions were deferred. Regardless of the outcome for individual schools, the Council's policy and intentions remain in force, and are indeed reinforced by the post-inspection action plan in which the reduction of surplus places is given top priority.

Powys Community Schools Action

Predictably, the proposal to close six community schools provoked outrage amid widespread belief that the Council had bowed to pressure and abandoned its measured (albeit prejudiced) approach for a mere panic attack. Those connected with the six schools were, obviously, at the forefront of the wave of concern, but many others shared that concern, either as a matter of principle or because of connections with other small schools which suddenly appeared vulnerable.

Out of this shared concern was born Powys Community Schools Action, a group of parents and governors from schools across Powys, operating with the support of other schools, national organisations and a number of politicians at local and national level, and acting on behalf of community schools throughout the county. For purely practical reasons, PCSA has not (yet) sought to become a broad-based, popular organisation, but has remained a small group of active individuals (some of whom, because of their positions, have needed to be very discreet).

Within the context of the current document we need to stress that we - the members of PCSA - are lay people whose original concern was simply the running of our local schools for the benefit of our communities and their children. We are not experts in educational theory, the law or economics, but we are intelligent people who have the best interests of our communities and their children at heart.

It was agreed at the very outset that the main thrust of the campaign should be directed towards the Welsh Assembly Government, rather than towards a Council which was to a large extent simply following orders. We also agreed that it was not simply a matter of saving small schools willy-nilly, but of looking for ways to sustain whole communities and to continue to provide modern schooling for younger children close to home.

The Petition

The wording of the petition followed naturally from the agreed aims of PCSA.

The number of signatures gathered - 2388 - represents the brief work of only a few communities. The petition was open for just two months, and this period spanned the summer holidays, which hampered liaison with schools and organisation generally. Under the circumstances - and given that some of the six immediately threatened schools had organised their own petitions - we have been gratified at the level of support.

Had the timing been different we could undoubtedly have increased the number of signatories. However, we felt that it was more important to act quickly, and to present cogent arguments before it was too late, than to demonstrate the last ounce of support. In any event, we would point out that in 2006 a petition was presented to Jane Davidson by the Association of Communities in Wales with Small Schools (ACWSS), who had collected some 15,000 signatures. The popular support is there, and we do not need to repeat what has already been done.

Our Allies

Although we are rooted in a single Welsh county, our principles have much wider application. As such, we both support, and are supported by, a number of individuals and organisations holding similar views. If our petition proceeds to the point that it is considered by one or more of the Assembly's committees, we would hope to call on at least some of our allies to give evidence.

We are very grateful for the considerable support, sometimes very active, which we have received from figures from right across the political spectrum and at all levels, from local councillors to MEPs. We would particularly like to thank Mick Bates AM, Kirsty Williams AM and Alun Davies AM.

In terms of organisations, we would name as obvious allies the National Association for Small Schools and the Society for Human Scale Education.

We have already mentioned ACWSS, which is in fact a partnership of six sympathetic organisations: WI, Merched y Wawr, FUW, YFC, CPRW and the Small Schools Fund. Some of these have been supporting us directly as well.

We need to single out as particular allies Cymdeithas yr Iaith (the Welsh Language Society) whose recent publication Village Schools; the Case for Positive Rationalisation we wholeheartedly endorse and commend to the Welsh Assembly Government. Although they are primarily concerned with Welsh medium education, many of their arguments apply to community schools generally, and (with their permission) we do quote or refer to some of them below.

The Issues

The essence of our argument is that, at primary level, education within the community is best for children, best for communities and best for society as a whole. When communities, and therefore schools, are small, cost per pupil (a favourite council statistic) does rise but we contend that this is money well spent and urge the Welsh Assembly Government to go further than it has hitherto done to accept this cost in return for the benefits which accrue.

In view of the quantity that has been written around these issues, our challenge in this document is to express the essentials succinctly. We hope that there will be an opportunity for us and our allies to offer more detailed arguments, should this be considered necessary.

Communities and Schools

In this document we are referring mainly to rural communities. We would argue that the benefits of community scale education are just as applicable to identifiable communities within urban areas, but we recognise that in the current economic climate it would be unrealistic for us to argue for a multiplicity of small schools in an urban context. In addition, there is a case to be made for the scale of education being commensurate with the size of the settlement being served, which would support the situation which we now have, of larger schools within towns. Adjustments in the sizes of such schools will have much less impact on the local community than the complete closure of a community's only school, as is the case in rural areas. Finally, the sense of community is generally stronger in rural areas than in towns.

We urge the Welsh Assembly Government to recognise that communities are a vital part of Welsh society and that their schools are a vital part of those communities. It is no exaggeration to say that the fabric of rural Wales is dependent upon its schools.

Most of Wales is populated by farms, hamlets, villages and larger settlements. This structure is traditional but it remains appropriate to the land-based occupations such as agriculture and forestry. It is also an integral part of the landscape which attracts incomers and the visitors which are now so important to the economy. There should be no question marks over the value of communities: the challenge is to restore their economic and environmental sustainability. This requires an understanding of the complex relationships which exist between housing, schooling, transport and economic activity in rural areas.

We contend that the populations of rural communities are as deserving of support and services as their urban cousins, even though some services (but not all) may cost more per capita to deliver. That communities feel undervalued is understandable given the evidence of almost daily threats of withdrawal of existing services, which are often sparse enough. Communities increasingly feel that they are not receiving value for the taxes they pay: village halls go bankrupt; health facilities and libraries become more and more distant; lavatories, shops and Post Offices close; public transport is a joke. It is not easy to make a living in the country, without travelling often considerable distances.

Of all community facilities, the school is the most important, because it denotes a living community, not just a place to sleep. Children always represent hope and renewal, so a school represents the community's future. This is particularly true when the school is a Welsh medium one, promoting the language and culture in line with national aspirations.

Wales and its regions constitute a highly distinctive yet diverse culture which the Welsh Assembly Government is, we feel confident, committed to sustaining. Schools and the communities within which they are situated are the font of this culture. If we wanted to live in a Wales that is dominated by a homogeneous globalised culture, the surest way to achieve such an aim would be to take schools out of communities and create complete uniformity in the delivery of education.

Community Scale Education

Children will flourish at excellently-led schools, regardless of their size. For the vast majority of schools, though, size does matter. Endless studies have been carried out within all kinds of settings, and most conclude that small schools, within their communities, give children a better start to life, emotionally, behaviourally and academically. Certainly, the National Association for Small Schools is able to produce evidence by the yard to support such a view. Those of us who formed Powys Community Schools Action have all been intimately involved with community schools and are passionately convinced of their value. Parents are similarly convinced, and have leaped to the defence of threatened schools, extolling their virtues.

Let us make just a few points highlighting the advantages of community scale education.

Children in the mixed-age classes which are typical of community schools perform better. They also mature quicker, as such classes are a microcosm of real life, unlike the artificial environment of single age classes. They learn from each other, the younger ones emulating the older ones, and the older ones learning to pass on what they know. In the process they learn cooperation and teamwork. They have few inhibitions about mixing with younger or older children outside the classroom. These children, on average, go on to do better at A level and beyond than children from larger schools.

Children at small schools tend to be more confident, to behave better, and to be more tolerant and accepting of children who are in any way 'different'. As a result, the 'different' child, who would sink in a large school, often thrives in a small one. Given the close and cooperative relationships that generally exist within community schools between staff, children and parents, it is no surprise that exclusions, anti-social behaviour and absenteeism - with all their associated costs and difficulties - are not normally problems associated with such schools. Such problems as do occur can quickly be spotted and dealt with.

When the school is part of a community, it is also a natural centre for both formal and informal social activity. Walking or cycling to school, where this is possible, is not only healthy but socially and educationally valuable.

When numbers are small, every child can participate fully in every activity ("everyone" gets a part in the Christmas concert) and every child benefits from greater attention in smaller classes.

The safe, caring, family atmosphere typical of a community school, coupled with its familiar location, makes it very easy for children to start school with a positive attitude that they are likely to retain.

Closure proposals are almost invariably made on the grounds of cost, yet studies have shown that savings from the closure of small schools are consistently overestimated and the actual savings achieved are often minimal - of the order of a few percentage points. That is without taking into account the environmental cost of transporting children, the impact on their health of being no longer able to walk or cycle to school, the emotional impact of school bus journeys (which are notorious for bringing out the worst in certain children, to the detriment of all), the future costs in terms of social services or policing resulting from children no longer learning within, and learning respect for, their own communities, and so on.

Where is the Problem?

We question whether rural communities are getting a fair deal in terms of resourcing. In fact, it seems that rural communities are being required to pay with their lives for a problem which mostly lies elsewhere.

Cymdeithas yr Iaith, looking specifically at Welsh medium village schools, estimated that some 200 such schools in Wales are threatened by current policies. Eliminating these schools would save some 10,000 of the 113,000 vacant places forecast by 2010. In other words, just 8% of the problem would be solved by such closures, at a cost of 200 communities! Put like that, the policy of hounding community schools becomes indefensible.

We would also question the emphasis which is continually being put on buildings. In the case of the threatened schools in Powys, costs per pupil are high simply because pupil numbers are low yet staff cannot be reduced below a certain minimum. If buildings could magically be shrunk to eliminate the dreaded 'surplus capacity' the economic arguments would remain absolutely unchanged, since salaries make up the overwhelming portion of these schools' budgets. Whilst we don't dismiss economic arguments, we do ask that they

be presented honestly. Colourful references to 'empty desks' do not reflect reality in most small schools: it is the larger schools that have not just empty desks, but empty classrooms. In Powys, at least, there is scope for rationalisation within the urban areas which can be undertaken without destroying whole communities.

There is a continual cry to raise standards in education, resulting in a constant stream of initiatives. Overlooked in this process is the fact that small schools are already delivering much of what is sought. Small classes, personal attention, well-developed personal and interpersonal skills and the other advantages of community scale education, outlined above, combine to ensure that the products of small schools often go on to out-perform their colleagues from larger schools. Studies confirm this, and we respectfully suggest that an appropriate response is the creation of a climate supportive of small schools, rather than one which is openly hostile, together with research into how the successes of small schools can be translated into the schools serving larger communities.

Remedies

We ask that the Welsh Assembly Government gives careful consideration to the specific proposals which are outlined below and summarised at the start.

Powys

We are not clear exactly how the pressure is put on Powys and other local authorities to address surplus capacity. That such pressure is a fact has been made abundantly clear to us during the closure consultations of recent months. Nor is it clear whether there is any incentive for local authorities to think strategically. What is clear is that local authorities are, rightly or wrongly, interpreting the pressure on them as a mandate to close small schools. The approach in Powys, outlined earlier, is indefensible except as a desperate cost-cutting measure: it contains no element of vision, nor of strategy, nor of educational standards. This is an unacceptable basis for such a fundamental and final step as closing a community's school. We submit that there is an urgent and overwhelming case for requiring (or at least encouraging) local authorities to plan their approach strategically and positively. This would also avoid all the problems associated with unsound closure proposals being referred to the Minister.

It is, as we have said, our understanding that Powys County Council has been put under considerable pressure by the Welsh Assembly Government, both directly and via Estyn, to address surplus capacity in schools, and is being financially penalised for being slow to do so, on top of suffering from a steady decline in central funding for the county. There is a perception that the particular situation and needs of the most rural county in Wales are not well understood or appreciated in Cardiff and that rather than punishing the county for its apparent tardiness, it would be more productive to recognise the difficulties it faces and to offer appropriate guidance.

Reacting to the pressure, the County Council appears to have been panicked into a crash programme of school closures to which no thought has been given other than of saving money. We fully understand and recognise that the Council must use limited resources wisely and must provide value for money. Achieving this, however, requires a strategic approach, not panic measures; our communities and their children are too valuable to be dismissed with such indecent haste.

Clearly, these are matters which are internal to Powys, but in order for the Council to be able to adopt a mature, thoughtful and inclusive approach, the Welsh Assembly Government must take off some of the pressure, particularly that being applied - quite inappropriately, we feel - by Estyn.

We need a solution to the problem of surplus places that is worthy of the people of Powys, not a quick and dirty act of back-street surgery that will leave ugly wounds and bitter memories. We need a positive vision of how quality education will be delivered, cost-effectively, to a scattered population with a birth rate which is falling in most places. We need "genuine" consultation with stakeholders in order to make it a shared vision (and we do have some proposals, which have been communicated to the Council, regarding the nature of genuine consultation). Above all, we need time in which to achieve this, and that is our most immediate request.

Once the school gates close for the last time, they will not reopen, and any change of heart or mind will be too late.

Joined-up Thinking

The issue of education within the community cuts across several areas which have traditionally been treated in isolation and we therefore appeal to the Welsh Assembly Government to genuinely join up the thinking around communities, rural affairs and education. This means ensuring that political and administrative structures aid, rather than inhibit, the planning and delivery of services to rural areas, perhaps in innovative ways. In the wake of the Beecham Report and talk of a citizen-centred approach and better integration of public services, these ideas should not be new or strange. Furthermore, the introduction of a rural health policy should make a rural education policy a natural successor.

Cymdeithas yr Iaith have made a particular study of joined-up thinking as it affects school buildings, which are often used a reason for closure. In their recent publication "Village Schools; the Case for Positive Rationalisation" they make a good case for a radical change in the way such buildings are managed, used and funded, and we commend these arguments to the Welsh Assembly Government. Rather than doing away with schools, there is ample scope for integrating them more closely with their communities, to the benefit of both.

It is all too easy to find examples at all levels of government where one department, interest or initiative appears to conflict with another: here is one such example. Local authorities are required to produce a Community Strategy, and that published by Powys is full of glowing references to vibrant and healthy communities, sustainability, access to services and all the rest of it, yet this document has no meaningful status. The County has gone through the motions and ticked the boxes, as required by the Welsh Assembly Government, and there has been the semblance of community involvement, but when it comes down to brass tacks the Community Strategy (which,

extraordinarily, makes no reference to schools) is roundly ignored. The school closure programme clearly conflicts hugely with the Community Strategy but is driven by a different agenda. This is just one example of a supposedly democratic process turning out to be a hollow sham, and we submit that the Welsh Assembly Government needs to take the lead in thinking through the ramifications of well-meaning initiatives and ensuring a consistency of approach that can be appreciated and understood by the populace.

Other examples have included an excess of health and safety and allied regulation which has resulted not so much in the raising of standards but in the loss of services which were, in the main, performing well and serving their communities. Abattoirs, pre-school groups, care homes and schools have all needlessly disappeared because regulation has had effects unforeseen by government, whether in Brussels, London or Cardiff.

Sustainability

This was a big item on the Welsh Assembly Government's agenda a few years ago, but early hopes have not been fulfilled. With sustainability written into the country's constitution, there was a real expectation that the Welsh Assembly Government might bring about much-needed change, but progress has been disappointingly slow. Even the word itself has been hijacked and, whereas it used to be generally accepted that it referred to issues of an environmental, social and ethical nature, it is now commonly used to refer to mere financial viability.

We urge the Welsh Assembly Government to make sustainability a central plank of all policies, as was promised. Doing so would provide a clear context in which the future of communities and their schools could be considered. For a start, one of the basic tenets of sustainability is that local needs should be met locally, and few things are as typically local as a community's school. Solutions involving bussing children around the countryside are so clearly contrary to the principles of sustainability that they should be a last, rather than first resort. With Peak Oil approaching, any solutions relying on cheap transport should be regarded as highly suspect not just environmentally, but economically.

Actions speak louder than words, particularly within the world of children, so what is the point of requiring them to be taught about global citizenship and sustainability issues in the classroom if the world around them tells a different story? Closing a school for purely economic reasons gives children a clear message about the priorities of the world they are entering, a world in which their well-being and the well-being of the planet come a poor second to the financial bottom line; a world in which schools are treated like factories and sited so as to reap economies of scale, while children are regarded as raw materials to be shunted around the country like cattle or coal at the convenience of economists. Can we do no better than this for the next generation?

There is - still - a wonderful opportunity for Wales to take leadership in this area which is so fundamental to the future of us all.

Resourcing

Summarizing the point we have made elsewhere, the people of Wales' rural communities are as deserving of good services as those in urban areas, and they should not be penalised if some of those services are a little more costly to deliver. The impression is sometimes given that bureaucrats would prefer it if we would all live neatly in designated towns, where uniform services could be laid on cheaply. Such an attitude misses the point that Wales is, geographically, a predominantly rural country, and it is the populated, living rural landscape that the tourists come to enjoy.

We feel there is also scope for more imaginative thinking around funding, and one example has been mentioned above (the proposals for the management of school buildings put forward by Cymdeithas yr Iaith). Responsibility for community development could to a much greater degree be shared with those who live in the communities concerned. If local authorities were encouraged to provide enablement to communities that formed community land trusts or local educational trusts, some of the costs of running community-based services could be shared.

Estyn

We are frankly disturbed at the role of Estyn in encouraging school closures, and in view of the commanding position held by Estyn within the world of education we ask the Assembly to give close and urgent attention to this point. Clearly, Estyn should be encouraging the maintenance and improvement of standards, but there needs to be some debate about the extent to which it should be an agent for implementing wider government policies.

It makes no sense to us that Estyn should be publicly praising a local authority for its plans to close schools which it has recently inspected and praised. This is, however, what has happened in Powys, and a distasteful spectacle it was. The very fact that such a contradiction can arise (since either the schools concerned are educationally sound or they are not) strongly suggests that Estyn is straying beyond the bounds of purely educational considerations. At the very least, some careful thought needs to be given to how, and to what extent, Estyn should examine local authorities' use of resources, as it is presumably this aspect of their remit that has resulted in what is effectively a conflict of interest. We recognise that in the inspection of LEAs Estyn acts in conjunction with the Wales Audit Office, which no doubt has more influence on the economic issues, but the fact remains that it was Estyn in the newspaper headlines, not the Wales Audit Office.

Although Powys County Council is fond of quoting a figure of £4m as being the cost of the 'empty desks' within the county (a figure which is not substantiated) it has never shown how the education of any child is suffering as a result, nor how the education of any child would improve as the result of the school closure programme. It is only the budget which would improve. It is therefore very difficult to see how Estyn is able to find "educational" grounds for criticising the Council's use of resources. The elimination of surplus places appears

to be a political or financial matter, which should not therefore be of concern to Estyn.

The final disturbing aspect is the fact that the Estyn inspector was present at the supposedly closed meeting at which the Board of Powys County Council voted to go ahead with the closure programme. Why? Was he there to ensure that they did as they were told? Is this a proper role for our educational inspection body?

Guidance, Consultation and Democracy

Our final point is another critical one and one which we feel the Welsh Assembly Government could and should address speedily, and it concerns the way in which school closure proposals are processed by councils and by the Welsh Assembly Government.

Once again we are indebted to Cymdeithas yr Iaith, who have clearly articulated the current problems in "Village Schools; the Case for Positive Rationalisation". We commend these arguments to the Welsh Assembly Government but also refer to them in the following paragraphs.

We would of course like to see a presumption against the closure of small schools and we feel it is a matter for regret that Wales should lag behind English and Scottish practice in this respect.

Perhaps more importantly in the short term, we feel that it is vital that the Welsh Assembly Government should ensure that its own existing guidance in respect of school organisation proposals is properly adhered to. At present, local authorities are being allowed to present stylised and generalised arguments as 'evidence' without being challenged. Although the Cymdeithas yr Iaith paper leans heavily on experience in Carmarthenshire, here in Powys we are already seeing ominous signs that a slipshod approach is perfectly acceptable. The consultation papers issued for the six currently threatened schools are almost identical and all are extremely lightweight, completely failing to make any real case for closure, let alone a 'robust' case. No attempt had been made to consider the schools individually, nor to consider them within their local contexts. When challenged, the Council responded that the consultation papers were of the kind expected by the Welsh Assembly Government. Something is clearly very wrong here but whether the fault lies in Cardiff or Llandrindod Wells, it is the responsibility of the Welsh Assembly Government to ensure that guidance is followed.

More is at stake here than immediately meets the eye. The Welsh Assembly Government is currently at pains to bring democracy to the people and we commend this initiative insofar as it is genuine. However, the Welsh Assembly Government needs to be aware that the way in which it is allowing school closure proposals to be processed is seriously undermining belief in democratic processes. In this respect we would like to quote one paragraph in full from the Cymdeithas yr Iaith paper:

"It is very iniquitous that WAG allows the LEA to treat such a guideline with contempt. This throws WAG circulars into disrepute. Far more importantly, this throws the democratic consultation process into disrepute. By now, parents and governors understand that Carmarthenshire Education Authority is determined to sell off village schools and the consultation process is a token exercise which is never going to change anything and there is never a meaningful examination of any alternative to closure or study into the impact of closure. This alienates parents and governors alike from both the education process and local democracy. At the exact time when parents and others are manifesting concern for the education of their children and when schools should have good reason to be delighted that apathy does not reign, the LEA is allowed to conspire against them rather than working with them. The WAG guidelines have become completely meaningless and the responsibility for WAG to rectify the situation is of high priority."

This is strongly worded but we have to concur, as all the signs are that Powys is going exactly the same way. It does indeed make a mockery of the requirement, to take a single example, to consider "the overall effect of closure on a community" if a local authority is encouraged to dismiss this with a cut-and-paste paragraph which even the most casual observer can see is meaningless. This is not, surely, the way things were meant to be when the guidance was drawn up.

We would also draw attention to the Welsh Assembly Government's management of School Building Improvement Grants as a reason for local authorities drawing up closure plans: this is cited by Cymdeithas yr Iaith and we have also heard it from Powys County Council.

Conclusion

There are elements of criticism of existing government policy within the foregoing pages. This is understandable, since we would not otherwise have felt the need to raise a petition. However, we have endeavoured to demonstrate a constructive approach, not simply attacking perceived shortcomings but proposing solutions where it is within our competence to do so. Accordingly, we wish to repeat the offer made during our meeting with Jane Hutt on 11 October, to the effect that PCSA is perfectly willing to work with the Welsh Assembly Government in the search for solutions.

In terms of next steps, we would not presume to suggest how our petition should be dealt with, but we would like to stress that our concerns do span both Education and Rural Affairs and we would be unhappy to see the petition being handled exclusively by either department.

Finally, we are grateful to the Welsh Assembly Government for providing the structure within which we can present our petition and our case. We thank you for reading this far and invite you to respond to the contact person named on the opening page. It is our sincere hope that the Welsh Assembly Government will give due, serious and timely consideration to the points that we have raised.

Powys Community Schools Action
October 2007

Annex D

Additional information supplied by petitioners

Powys Community Schools Action

Val Lloyd AM 2 January 2008
Chair, Petitions Committee
National Assembly for Wales

Ref: PET-03-089

Dear Ms Lloyd

We would like to thank you and the other members of the Petitions Committee for accepting and commencing consideration of our petition. We have taken note of your initial reactions, as recorded in the transcript of the meeting on 6 December, and we have also had contact with Committee Support Officer. We hope that you will be able to consider this letter at your next meeting, on 17 January.

As I remarked to Mike German when handing over the petition to him on 20 November, we always recognised that the necessarily wide-ranging nature of our concerns would make it hard for the Committee to decide how best to handle it. Whilst we remain unapologetic about the breadth of those concerns, we understand and are not unduly surprised by the Committee's request that we should express ourselves more succinctly and with a greater emphasis on the practical steps which we would like to see taken. We hope that this response succeeds in meeting those aims.

First: the problem. Officers of Powys County Council told governing bodies of the schools which it is initially proposing to close that this was something which the Council had to do; that if it did not do so, the Welsh Assembly Government would impose a similar programme of closures and would, meanwhile, withhold grants. From our contacts with other counties it is clear that there is a widespread view that local authorities have a mandate to close small schools - and, indeed, an obligation to do so. We find it hard to believe that the Welsh Assembly Government is really promoting such a sweepingly aggressive attitude towards community schools; there has certainly been no open, national debate about the issue. We therefore conclude that existing guidance to local authorities is either inadequate or is being ignored or misunderstood. Either way, the situation demands clear leadership before it is too late: only the Welsh Assembly Government is in a position to provide the necessary guiding vision of the future for Wales' rural areas and communities.

The essence of our appeal is therefore that the Welsh Assembly Government should develop, adopt and implement an appropriate policy towards rural communities and their schools: a rural education policy, in fact. The kind of policy which we would regard as 'appropriate' will be clear from our original submission.

Second: the method. We propose the following practical steps:

1. An immediate moratorium on closures of rural schools which are against the wishes of their communities. Local authorities should be encouraged to seek economies which fall short of closure and to prepare and consult upon coherent rationalisation plans but not to proceed with actual closures (unless uncontroversial).
2. A prompt but comprehensive review of all aspects of community schools, recognising not only the genuine difficulties involved but also the considerable value of these schools' contribution in educational, social, cultural and linguistic terms, and the opportunities which they offer for further community development. We would expect such a review to accept evidence from all interested parties, including ourselves and allied organisations. This would be our opportunity to more fully develop the themes outlined in our original submission and thereby contribute to the constructive process of finding a way forward.
3. Development and adoption of a rural education policy reflecting the evidence emerging during the review, which is realistic in economic terms and, crucially, which meshes coherently with other policies, notably health, social inclusion and sustainability.
4. Replacement of the moratorium by promulgation and implementation of the new rural education policy.

We remain very willing to respond positively to any invitation to put our case in person, or to answer questions relating to our petition.

Yours sincerely

Powys Community Schools Action

ANNEX E

Y Pwyllgor Deisebau Petitions Committee

Letter to Minister from Petitions Committee

Jane Hutt AM
Minister for Children, Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills
Welsh Assembly Government

Cardiff Bay
CF99 1NA

Our ref: P-03-089

31 January 2008

Dear Jane

Petition - Powys Community Schools

The Petitions Committee considered this petition for the first time on 17 January 2008. The petitioners assert that the Welsh Assembly Government's policy on school reorganisation is:

To place an obligation on local authorities to close small schools.

To impose a programme of school closures in Powys, whilst withholding grants, if Powys County Council does not initiate its own programme of school closures.

The Committee agreed to ask you for the Welsh Assembly Government's current policy position in relation to this issue.

The Committee is taking oral evidence from the petitioners at its meeting on 21 February 2008. To help inform this session, the Committee would very much welcome a swift response from you on this matter.

A copy of the original petition, and additional information supplied by the petitioners is attached to this letter.

Yours sincerely



Val Lloyd
Chair, Petitions Committee

Enc.

Petition and additional information

Annexes F and G are attached as separate documents