

Jane Hutt AC/AM

Y Gweinidog dros Blant, Addysg, Dysgu Gydol Oes a Sgiliau
Minister for Children, Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills

Letter from Minister to Petitions Committee



Llywodraeth Cynulliad Cymru
Welsh Assembly Government

Eich cyf/Your ref P-03-071
Ein cyf/Our ref JH/00158/08

Val Lloyd AM
Valerie.Lloyd@Wales.gov.uk

12 February 2008

Dear Val,

Thank you for your letter of 31 January 2008 about the petition submitted by Powys Community Schools Action. The group asserts that the Welsh Assembly Government is placing an obligation on local authorities to close small schools. It also asserts that a programme of closures will be imposed on Powys County Council, whilst withholding grants, unless action is taken. You ask for clarification of our policy on school reorganisation.

Our policy on school reorganisation is set out in Circular 23/02. This can be found on the Welsh Assembly Government website as follows

<http://new.wales.gov.uk/topics/educationandskills/publications/circulars/circular-no-2302?lang=en>

This document makes it clear that we expect funding for education to be used cost effectively. The circular highlights the fact that some surplus places are necessary to enable schools to cope with fluctuations in numbers of pupils, but excessive numbers of unused places mean that resources are tied up unproductively. There is an expectation that where surplus places are excessive, authorities should review their provision, and where feasible, make proposals for their removal especially where a school has significant levels of surplus. In respect of rural schools, the document states that the case for closure must be robust and the proposals must be in the best interests of educational provision in the area.

The Powys Community Schools Action group is well aware of this policy and they had an opportunity to give me their views on policies for rural schools, at a meeting held in October 2007, when Kirsty Williams AM was also present.

I advised the group on that occasion that Circular 23/02 would be reviewed in the future. That review is currently underway within the Welsh Assembly Government, and consultation with stakeholders will take place in due course. The review is necessary at this time both to reflect policy developments such as 14-19 Learning Pathways and the Foundation Phase, but also in the light of the pressing need to make the most efficient use of resources for education in order to raise standards.

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Whilst local authorities such as Powys may initially focus their attention on smaller schools, this is not as a result of a specific directive from the Welsh Assembly Government. The responsibility for deciding what schools are needed to serve different areas rests with local education authorities and decisions must be taken in the light of local knowledge and local needs. I fully expect that in rural areas, some small schools will continue to be required, and the One Wales document indicated clearly that small and rural schools would continue to be supported with additional grants, which were first established in 2002.

I welcome the action that Powys has taken to strategically review provision, but cannot comment on any specific actions which are currently being undertaken as a result of that review. Changes to school organisation normally requires statutory procedures including consultation and the publication of notices, with the opportunity to object. As statutory proposals which result in objections come to me for determination I cannot comment on any individual cases. I have not yet seen any papers on the proposals published by Powys in the Autumn, but all have attracted objections. When they are submitted to me for determination, I will consider each on its merits and consider in close detail whether each one is likely to contribute to improved standards of education for current and future pupils.

The Welsh Assembly Government has powers under the School Standards and Framework Act 1998 to direct local authorities to bring forward proposals for school reorganisation where it is concluded that there is either surplus or insufficient provision. There are also powers for the Welsh Assembly Government to bring forward its own proposals to deal with overprovision or insufficiency. I am not currently considering an instance where such powers would be required.

One of the assertions made in your covering letter seems to be connected with grants for school buildings. Since 2002, all local education authorities have received a share of School Building Improvement grant (SBIG) distributed according to an established formula. In addition since 2005-06 each authority has been able to draw on an additional £9million each, to be spent on major projects up to 2009/10. Powys has almost completed its draw down of this additional funding and the last major project is due to be completed in 2008/09. Powys will receive a share of formula SBIG next year which amounts to over £2 million.

From 2009/10, it is likely that there will be some changes in the way any additional funding is allocated. In the policy document The Learning Country: Vision into Action, published in October 2006, the Welsh Assembly Government signalled an intention to develop links between the allocation of capital funding for schools and effective strategic planning by LEAs that reflected local demand for school places. We are moving forward on this so as to encourage more strategic use of capital funding and to provide an incentive to effective school reorganisation planning. This initiative is still at an early stage and there will be wide consultation in due course. I anticipate however, that all local authorities will continue to receive formula shares of SBIG.

Yours,

Jane