



**Cynulliad Cenedlaethol Cymru
The National Assembly for Wales**

**Yr Is-bwyllgor Datblygu Gwledig
The Rural Development Sub-committee**

**Dydd Mercher, 11 Mehefin 2008
Wednesday, 11 June 2008**

Cynnwys
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Cofnodir y trafodion hyn yn yr iaith y llefarwyd hwy ynddi yn y pwyllgor. Yn ogystal, cynhwysir cyfieithiad Saesneg o gyfraniadau yn y Gymraeg.
These proceedings are reported in the language in which they were spoken in the committee.
In addition, an English translation of Welsh speeches is included.

Aelodau'r pwyllgor yn bresennol
Committee members in attendance

Alun Davies	Llafur (Cadeirydd yr Is-bwyllgor) Labour (Sub-committee Chair)
Michael German	Democratiaid Rhyddfrydol Cymru (yn dirprwyo ar ran Mick Bates) Welsh Liberal Democrats (substitute for Mick Bates)
Alun Ffred Jones	Plaid Cymru The Party of Wales
Brynle Williams	Ceidwadwyr Cymreig Welsh Conservatives

Eraill yn bresennol
Others in attendance

Lorraine Barrett	Aelod Cynulliad, Llafur Assembly Member, Labour
Yr Athro/Professor Glen Bramley	Athro Astudiaethau Trefol, Prifysgol Heriot-Watt Professor of Urban Studies, Heriot-Watt University
Yr Athro/Professor David Reynolds	Athro Addysg, Prifysgol Plymouth Professor of Education, University of Plymouth

Swyddogion Gwasanaeth Seneddol y Cynulliad yn bresennol
Assembly Parliamentary Service officials in attendance

Joanne Clinton	Dirprwy Glerc Deputy Clerk
Claire Morris	Clerc Clerk

Dechreuodd y cyfarfod am 9.10 p.m.
The meeting began at 9.10 p.m.

Ymchwiliad i Ddarparu Addysg yng Nghefn Gwlad Cymru ac Ad-Drefnu
Ysgolion Gwledig
Inquiry into Provision of Rural Education in Wales and the Reorganisation Of
Rural Schools

[1] **Alun Davies:** Galwaf y cyfarfod i drefn. Diolch am eich presenoldeb y bore yma. Dyma'r ail gyfarfod fel rhan o'n hymchwiliad i ysgolion bach yng Nghymru wledig. Croesawaf yr Athro Reynolds i'r cyfarfod. Mae'r pwyllgor wedi cael cyfle i ddarllen eich gwaith a'ch ymchwil yn y maes. Hoffai aelodau'r pwyllgor ofyn cwestiynau i chi a thrafod y gwaith yr ydych wedi cyhoeddi yn y maes hwn. Cyn i ni wneud hynny, gofynnaf i chi wneud ychydig o sylwadau agoriadol am eich gwaith a'ch casgliadau.

Alun Davies: I call the meeting to order. Thank you for attendance this morning. This is our second meeting as part of our inquiry into small schools in rural Wales. I welcome Professor Reynolds to the meeting. The committee has had an opportunity to read your work and your research in the field. Committee members would like to ask you questions and discuss the work that you have published in this area. Before we do that, I ask you to make a few opening remarks about your work and your conclusions.

[2] **Professor Reynolds:** In many ways, the sadness of the research was that it was quite a small sample and on quite a small scale. However, because of the absence, historically, of any other research, it assumed considerable significance within the debate. In an ideal world, the Welsh Assembly Government now, or the Welsh Office historically, should have done research on this topic. Having said that, it was a small sample, and we made the research as scientific as we possibly could.

[3] To get one point out of the way, the schools were not nominated by the local authorities as being schools where there was particularly good evidence that closure was positive. The schools were chosen by John Osmond of the Institute of Welsh Affairs, who chose them from the list of schools that had shut over time. So, there was no question of us selecting schools that were especially favourable. In fact, the truth is that John Osmond, historically, would have been opposed to the closure of small schools. So, if there was going to be a bias, it would have been in a totally different direction. Having said that, we were as scientific as we could be. We questioned only 48 people, eight of whom were children. We tried to question parents, governors, headteachers, and teachers. The remarkable thing about the research was that, however you cut it, the overwhelming view among our respondents was favourable. Even if you added achievement data on how well the pupils did, the pupils in the schools in Pembrokeshire that were reorganised did better after the reorganisation than those in the non-reorganised schools.

[4] The data included the impact of closure on the Welsh language—which is counterintuitive, but it was there—the impact of the closure on the community, on academic results, and on efficiency. However you cut it, whichever question you look at, if you look at either Pembrokeshire or Powys—because there was a difference between the two; Pembrokeshire was slightly more favourable—and whichever bit of data you look at, it all points in the same direction, which is that closure was a positive experience for the schools and the people whom we surveyed. In addition to that piece of research, at the end of the research you will see that we played around with some ideas, most of which had come to us from people as we did the research, about how the process could be made more effective. You will have seen our ideas about that. So, I would take my stand on the research being small scale but good science, in spite of what others might have said to you.

[5] **Alun Davies:** Thank you very much for that, Professor Reynolds. It is an interesting proposition that the closure of a school can be a positive experience. I think that many of us would almost have a sense that the closure or the loss of any facility of almost any description would lead to a negative feeling and would add to a great deal of uncertainty within that community in terms of the knock-on impact on the nature of that community, and the quality of the service being provided—whether that is a school or another service. You are saying quite clearly that, in reality, those negatives exist within people's preconceptions or perceptions prior to any closure taking place, but that the closure itself is a positive—you seem to be saying that it is almost a cathartic experience.

[6] **Professor Reynolds:** I do not know about cathartic, but it seemed in this research to be, frankly, a positive and a good thing. I was surprised. I have a little column in the *Western Mail*, and had written in favour of keeping small schools going, no matter what the cost, and by 'small' I meant schools of 20 to 50 pupils. The research was a big surprise to me, as was the consistency of the findings—the children preferred the bigger schools, because they had more friends, there were more sports teams, and there were more facilities. I suppose that one should not have been surprised by that. However, for parents, teachers and headteachers, a school of three or four teachers, as opposed to one or two teachers, gives you the chance of specialisation, and a chance to vary the diet, because you have multiple persons to vary it with. The small schools are very, very small—we are talking about tiny little schools.

[7] What comes out of this is that the advantage for the reorganised schools was still for schools that were small. Therefore, all we are talking about here is the difference between the very, very small and the very small. The reorganised schools, in most cases, were still of about 100 pupils, which, by international standards, and by English standards, is small. We need to get a sense of proportion in this debate. We are not talking about creating big schools—we are creating schools that are bigger, but we are talking about schools that are still very small, from communities that are still very small, by all international and English standards. I do not believe that that has been fully understood.

[8] **Alun Ffred Jones:** Yr wyf am fynd â chi yn ôl at eich sylwadau gwreiddiol, Athro Reynolds. Yr ydym wedi clywed tystiolaeth, ac mae datganiadau wedi eu gwneud, bod yr ymchwil hwn yn ddiffygiol. Yr ydych chi'n athro prifysgol, ac yn darllen ac yn creu adroddiadau drwy'r amser. Mae Cymdeithas Genedlaethol yr Ysgolion Bach yn dweud bod yr adroddiad yn gwadu'r ffeithiau sy'n profi bod ysgolion bach crystal ag ysgolion mwy ym mhob ffordd.

Alun Ffred Jones: I want to take you back to your original comments, Professor Reynolds. We have received evidence, and statements have been made, that this research is deficient. You are a university professor, and you read and write reports constantly. The National Association for Small Schools states that the report denies the facts that prove that small schools are as good as larger schools in every way.

[9] Felly, a gaf bwyso arnoch eto, a gofyn i ba raddau yr ydych yn hapus bod y fethodoleg yr oeddech yn ei defnyddio yn *robust* ac yn gywir?

Therefore, could I press you again, and ask you to what extent you are content that the methodology that you used was robust and correct?

[10] **Professor Reynolds:** I am not content that we had such a small sample. Ideally, we would have had many more schools, and many more people. Therefore, as I said in my initial comments, I am not content that so much publicity was given to such a small sample, although some sample is better than none; I would have preferred a higher number of respondents. However, having said that, I have read the criticisms in detail and I would attach weight to only one of the criticisms, which was the one that states that we should not have asked a question that had six parts to it. There was a question where we asked something like, 'What did you think the effect of the closure was on the community, the language, effectiveness, and efficiency?'. That question could have been better phrased.

[11] I have done a lot of what I hope is regarded as internationally renowned research, and I am happy to stand by the methodology of this study and its conclusions. To be honest, it was not as if the data took you in different directions. If the data from the two authorities had gone in totally different directions—for example, if one group of people, or two groups, had gone in a different way, or if the governors had said different things from the parents, or if the kids had said different things from the parents or the governors—I might have started to wonder about exactly what we had found. However, when every single bit of data goes in the same direction, as well as the data on the achievement of the pupils, which were not collected by us, but by Pembrokeshire, you have to be pretty foolish or biased to ignore that. My humble view about the national association and the other persons criticising us is that they are just too biased to see the truth.

9.20 a.m.

[12] **Alun Ffred Jones:** Some parents from Powys, who came to present evidence last week, kept saying that there was anecdotal evidence to suggest that small schools were better, that children were happier in them and made quite a number of statements of that nature. You state in the conclusion to your report that many may consider the findings of the study to be counterintuitive. What do you mean by 'counterintuitive'?

[13] **Professor Reynolds:** One's intuition in Wales has been to favour the small, and I was just saying about what I had written historically, without research and before the research. I had always assumed that a school of 20, 40 or perhaps 50 pupils had and gave things that a school of 60 or 100 pupils would not give, so the results ran against my intuition, and were counterintuitive in that way. A lot of one's intuition on this is, frankly, media-fed; if you look at endless portrayals on television of protesting parents saying that they want to keep schools of 20, 40 or 50 pupils open, it may be that one's intuition follows the television. The interesting thing about the television coverage is that you see the parents protesting, but you never see the new school—you never get to look at the facilities of the new school on the television and what people think about that. You are shown a negative reaction against closure—you are never shown the alternatives. So, I think that my intuition about this issue, which would be that of many people in Wales, has been largely generated by, frankly, uninformed media discussion about the topic. That is currently carrying on, I would venture to suggest, in Gwynedd, where the discussion appears to be equally uninformed.

[14] **Alun Ffred Jones:** Tell me about it. May I challenge you on one thing? I have seen many Estyn reports on schools of varying size—from the very small to the very large—mainly in the Gwynedd area. By and large, I would say that the Estyn reports do not differentiate, in terms of the quality of the teaching or the standards of the pupils, as far as I can make out, between the smaller and the larger schools. Whether the school is successful or not does not depend on the size of the school. So, in that sense, is there any difference in quality between a small and a larger school?

[15] **Professor Reynolds:** I should say that Estyn reports are not scientific, and it does not pretend or purport to be scientific.

[16] **Alun Ffred Jones:** May we quote you on that? Estyn is not scientific.

[17] **Professor Reynolds:** It does things other than scientific research. I cannot vouch for Estyn, but my understanding is that if you were to take the schools of 100 pupils or less, you would find that those schools were every bit as good as, or, in some cases, better, than larger schools. However, the point is—and other people have also said this, and there is research that finds this—that if you disaggregate the schools of, say, less than 100 pupils into the very small and the very, very small, the very small schools will do better than the very, very small schools, for reasons that are easy to discover. The issue is not about small schools—it is about whether tiny schools are better or worse than schools that are very small by everyone's standards, and the research would suggest that tiny schools do not give you advantages.

[18] **Michael German:** My question also relates to recommendation 7 in your report, about at what size a reorganised school should be capped. If you read behind the lines, then, effectively—and you have emphasised this point just now—it is almost saying that, 'We would like to retain small schools, but we do not want very, very small schools'. Are you prepared to give us a rough boundary line between what you think should be retained and what you think should be promoted in terms of small schools?

[19] **Professor Reynolds:** It would be dangerous to give you a boundary line based on science because there is not the research to justify it. There is not the research internationally, and this research cannot give you that boundary. My own view, beyond science, would be that probably three to four-teacher schools, which means schools of 60 to 80 pupils, would give you an advantage in comparison with the very small, and that that is what we should therefore be thinking about. However, that is my personal view and not a research-based view.

[20] **Michael German:** So, there is no evidence anywhere on this matter.

[21] **Professor Reynolds:** No, because the situation internationally is so different from that in Wales, where we have very small schools. You rarely get that internationally. In England, many of the very small schools have now gone, so this is the only evidence available, and one is going beyond this report to make that statement. I would say that the ballpark figure of 60 to 80 pupils, maybe 100—that is, schools with four or five teachers—would be an acceptable compromise between the benefits of size and the benefits of smallness without being tiny.

[22] **Michael German:** So, you are saying that the very small schools should be reorganised into schools of that sort of size.

[23] **Professor Reynolds:** Yes.

[24] **Michael German:** So, very small schools would become small schools.

[25] **Professor Reynolds:** Yes. The very small schools would go, and we would still have schools that are small by international standards. The benefits of reorganisation would be the freeing up of resources to help all schools and all children. There are forgotten actors and actresses in this drama and these politics, who are the people who inhabit the large schools. That is because the money is going to small schools, probably disproportionately. As a sub-committee, you need to remember the areas of Wales other than the small villages and the bigger schools that may not have the money that they should have, because it is spent disproportionately on very small schools.

[26] **Michael German:** That brings me neatly to the issue of surplus places, which every local authority seems to be addressing at the moment. I will ask the next questions as a suite, because they are all linked. Is our current definition of surplus places appropriate? Will surplus places continue as we have said they will? Does the evidence show that there will be fewer surplus places in future? If so, what should we do about that? If you were a local authority looking now at how to manage education and the school population across its patch, given whatever changes there are, what would your key issues be? What should local authorities be focusing their minds on?

[27] **Professor Reynolds:** To take the last question first—because I can remember it—local authorities must match the pattern of provision based on historical population with the provision that you are getting, based on population change and movement. That matching is a difficult task, and it is worthwhile saying that it is particularly so for local authorities in Wales, because there are two things operating that constrain their capacity to make sensible decisions. The first is the limited amount of money available for capital spend, which is running at a third of the level in England. That means that local authorities may be being forced to make decisions that they would not otherwise make because of the unsuitability of certain schools set against the capital budget.

[28] The second is that the decision making of local authorities in Wales may not be optimal or rational, because we are not spending the money on education that we should be. In other words, there should be more spare that might enable one to be optimal and, if necessary, to maintain small, if not very small, schools when they may cost more than large schools. You will be aware that expenditure on education in England has increased much more rapidly than it has in Wales. There are pressures on the Welsh education budget, and those two things mean that local authorities have a very difficult task.

[29] However, if those two pressures of capital and recurrent funding were eased, it might be easier for local authorities to preserve the very small schools, rather than the tiny, in circumstances where that was needed, without adversely affecting the mainstream provision.

Does that answer your question?

9.30 a.m.

[30] **Michael German:** That brings me back to the first two questions, which were about surplus places. We have a definition of surplus places, and we have some evidence that the population is rising again in the younger age bracket. I do not know how robust the data are on that matter, but you would think that we would know, given that the children have already been born. Are we trying to address a larger problem than the one that will exist in future years, and are we actually saying that the definition of surplus places is accurate?

[31] **Professor Reynolds:** It is very difficult to know because the pick-up in births happened in one year. It was in 2006 that the birth cohort was larger than in the previous year. I have not seen the figures for 2007. If the figure for 2007 also picks up and so the rate has picked up for two years in succession, you could probably begin to think that the population will pick up, and that what appears to be a surplus place now will not be surplus in five or six years' time.

[32] It is also worth saying that, in England, there is a different kind of issue about surplus places, because a lot of the migrants from eastern Europe and so on have young children, or have come with children. So, in some of the big English cities, surplus places are not such a big issue because those persons are making it less of an issue. We have not had that in Wales to quite the same degree, historically, with the exception of places such as Wrexham and so on. So, it is entirely possible that were we to get that kind of inward migration, and it is possible that we will, in a sense, a surplus place will not be a surplus place, as in the big cities, because those schools may well take persons from other parts of the EU. Aside from that, I am not certain that one can push—

[33] **Michael German:** I do not want to lead you too much, but there was one question that I was really trying to see whether you had an opinion on. A surplus place is only a surplus place if you have identified a number of pupils who should be in a school because then, of course, you can say, 'You could take 100, but you have got only 60, and so you have 40 spare places'. Is that an appropriate measure? Is that how we should be doing things, or should we say, 'As long as we have three to four teachers in a school, that is fine'?

[34] **Professor Reynolds:** It is difficult to know an alternative. If a school is equipped to teach 100 pupils and it is teaching 50, the assumption is that it has 50 surplus places. I do not know whether there is an alternative to that. One thing that I would appreciate further guidance on from the Assembly, and actually some further research, is the cost of a surplus place, whatever it may be. The cost apparently varies. I have seen £500 quoted, I have seen quotations down to £150, and I have even heard people say, 'Look, there is no real cost to a surplus place; it is a notional thing against what the school once had'. I would like to see an exploration of how much a surplus place costs and what that cost comprises, because I am unclear about that. When people are differing by a factor of three, four or five on the cost, I think that that should be sorted out.

[35] **Brynle Williams:** I am just curious, Professor Reynolds, as to whether you can quantify 'small', 'very small' and 'tiny' in numbers. I may be a bit stupid, but I am just curious. To me, a small school would be 20 to 30 pupils and a tiny school would be five or six pupils, or up to 10. would you define that?

[36] **Professor Reynolds:** Again, this is a personal cut on data, not data, and it is not a preordained classification. To me, when I have called schools 'very small' or 'tiny', I would be talking about 20 through to 50 or 60 pupils. 'Small', to me, would be 60 through to 100 pupils; 'medium sized', by Welsh standards, would be anything from 100 through to 200, and

I would imagine that more than 200 would be classed as 'large'. That is my personal view about how I handle this issue in my own mind. It is not research-based and others may not agree with it.

[37] **Lorraine Barrett:** Thank you. All of this is fascinating, by the way. I have a question about the effects of amalgamation, reorganisation and the closure of small schools, as seen by the headteachers, parents, children, governors and everyone else, particularly the communities. As we are a Rural Development Sub-committee, the community is important to our work, and not just on this issue. In your paper, you say that a school's closure should be about the needs of the children and not those of the parents or communities. Could you say a little more about the effect on communities, because I cannot divorce the two in my mind? The children and the school are a part of the community to me, and the closure of a school could lead to the breakdown of that community. However, as you say, when it comes to children's education, you only get one stab at it in life. Could you expand on the effects, as you have seen them in your research?

[38] **Professor Reynolds:** If we had had more time, it would have been useful to try to do an archaeology of the communities as they were and of the larger communities that feed the schools as they are now, but there was no time. All we had to rely on were the answers of respondents when we asked them whether they thought that the community was better or worse or whether it had stayed the same. The interesting thing was how people put the community in the same ballpark as everything else that we asked them about, including the Welsh language and standards.

[39] The change was seen as a positive thing by children and parents and not as a negative. I took that to mean that, after reorganisation, the parents probably saw their community as somewhat larger, but it was not sufficiently large to be disorientating or anomalous in any way. We are talking about potential little villages coming together to feed a school in a bigger village or in a small town. In no sense did the parents think that the community was worse off. The little village was still there and the small town provided further resources. For the children, it meant more friends in the sense that the children's and the parents' world had got slightly bigger, but they still had the resources of a small village and community to rely on. I use the analogy that they were able to lean backwards against a stake that gave them identity, and that firm identity enabled them to look out around a slightly bigger area than they had done before. However, because they had the secure, rural identity, that gave them that chance. So, things were not worse. It was not as though they had gone to a city of 1 million people; they had gone to a slightly bigger community that was not doing any damage, because it was still small.

[40] That finding was counterintuitive. I had not expected people to provide such answers. It tells me that, if you look at a school of 20, 40, 60, 80 or 100 pupils, and if you look at the size of the communities that feed those schools, you will see that only around 5 or 10 per cent of people go to such small schools from such small communities. So, even after reorganisation, which led to bigger schools and bigger communities, the experience of the parents and the children was still that of living in a small world, by the standards of the big city and by the standards of all other populations. So, I am not surprised if they still saw that as a good world, because it is still, by everyone else's standards, a small, cohesive and organised world.

[41] **Alun Davies:** I understand that point, but the evidence that we received last week from people in Powys was that it is true that those communities still exist—the bricks and mortar and the people are still there—but their point, made very powerfully, was that the strength and cohesion of that community would be impacted on by such closures. You talk about the difference and interaction between people in these communities, and we understand that we are not talking about throwing very small communities, for argument's sake, such as

those in Powys, into the middle of Cardiff. However, the impact on these small communities remains greater when you take away the services and facilities in those communities, because that then takes away the cement or the glue that holds those communities together.

[42] **Professor Reynolds:** To be frank, before undertaking the research, I would have expected that to have come through from our respondents. It did not—that is all I can say.

9.40 a.m.

[43] **Lorraine Barrett:** Just as an aside, I represent a very urban area, and I have seen the absolute outrage and concern from parents when it was proposed to amalgamate an old infants school and a junior school that share the same site to create a single primary school, because they felt that their children would be losing something rather than, in fact, gaining something.

[44] In your paper, you suggest that local authorities should deal with reorganisation or closure over a much shorter time to ensure that we do not have school blight or educational blight. I can see that, but I suppose that the other side of that argument is that parents and others want to feel that they are being consulted properly and that their considerations are being taken on board. Where they are necessary, how should small school closures be managed to ensure optimum results? Do you think that local education authorities should deal with such reorganisation wholesale rather than piecemeal, so that it is structured properly and you do not just have the closure of a school here with its children being sent elsewhere without the authorities looking at the whole jigsaw in that area? Is that more important, even though it might be resisted a bit more by parents?

[45] **Professor Reynolds:** My inclination is to favour the across-school, big-picture approach, as that gives one a chance to compare situations and be rational about the process. The only difficulty with that approach is that one sees one of the blights peculiar to this issue. A county publishes a big-picture document that is not seen to respond to local circumstances, containing as it does the announcement of school closures, but, because of pressures and changed minds, those schools are not closed. However, because of the original big picture, those schools have been closed in the minds of many people, and that gives rise to the blight in a way that would not happen if you were just taking it school by school. Having said that, I do not think that there is any alternative to the big picture. I think that one wants a process that encourages people who are affected to submit their views to authorities and does not take too long in doing that. One has heard of it taking seven to eight years for this process to run. Frankly, one is talking about two to three years as being the optimum to listen, plan and, if necessary, re-plan so that everybody gets a hearing and so that the thing will actually happen without damage.

[46] **Lorraine Barrett:** With regard to the impact on the outcomes, which we heard about last week, as Brynle said, some of what the witnesses said about educational attainment was anecdotal. Is there any robust research, or should we be doing continual research into the outcomes of the educational attainment of children once they have moved to a bigger school?

[47] **Professor Reynolds:** We are the only people that have ever looked at the before and after, which is what we have done in this small-scale study. It would be possible, of course—and I would urge the Assembly to do this—for the Assembly now very quickly to do a study that looks at academic achievement adjusted for background in larger and smaller schools. I am amazed that it has not been done. Your statisticians could do it in a day. If the stuff had been in the public domain, I would have done it, but it is not. I would urge the Assembly to conduct such a study to see whether the ideas in this report are right or, being open about this, whether the people who criticise this report—the National Association for Small Schools—are right. You could do it in a day, and I think that you should. It is a surprise to me that, in

Wales, we have not looked at this issue with the data that you have.

[48] **Lorraine Barrett:** Would that have to be done on a pupil-by-pupil basis? Would you be able to measure a six-year-old who moves up to a bigger school by the time that six-year-old turns 10, before he or she goes on to secondary school?

[49] **Professor Reynolds:** I do not know about the achievement because we do not have school assessment tests as we used to have. Whatever test data we have, I do not know whether it is tagged to an individual and then followed through; I am not sure about that. If doing a before-and-after comparison is difficult because the data are not tagged to a pupil, one could do a simple study that scientifically controls out everything except science. That can be done quite easily with the data that you have now and so we could sort this issue.

[50] **Alun Ffred Jones:** In your limited research, were there any examples of reorganisations that had not worked as well, and were there any specific characteristics to those reorganisations?

[51] **Professor Reynolds:** It is true to say that the experience in Powys was not as favourable as that of Pembrokeshire as seen by the respondents, and that, within the sample of six, reorganisation worked better in certain circumstances than others, accepting that in all circumstances it appeared to work well. However, there was that variation between the two authorities, and a slight variation across the six schools.

[52] **Alun Ffred Jones:** So, did you look at the nature of the communities in those areas in terms of whether the new school was close to the old school whereas some areas were larger?

[53] **Professor Reynolds:** No. We tried, however, to pick up suggestions for where things might be better from the respondents—the people of whom we asked questions—across all the schools. I am assuming that, in the schools where things were not as good, people told us what might make things better. For example, a number of respondents talked about how building work was still going on in the new school, and that the noise and dust affected pupils, which is absolutely unacceptable. My assumption is that that is the kind of thing that would have made the responses more unfavourable in certain schools. Certain schools and certain authorities made much better provision for teaching heads to have time off prior to the amalgamation or merger, so that they could plan what the heck was going to happen, which would help. That was not necessarily done universally.

[54] A small number of schools attempted to keep the villages and the older people in the villages on board with the new school by providing transport and so on to social or cultural evenings, but that was not universal. So, some of the recommendations at the back of the study are picking up on what people thought might have been done better. The recommendation that I would attach the most importance to is ensuring that school buildings are available for community use and that they are not derelict or handed on to others, so the kids will come back at the end of the day to the old school and the old school playground, as they used to. Person after person talked about how a village misses the sound of young voices and how it changes emotionally if the kids are not at the school and their voices cannot be heard. So, that might help.

[55] **Alun Ffred Jones:** Teachers were part of your research group, and, by and large, you say that they responded positively to the changes, but recent experience in Wales is that headteachers and teachers from very small schools have been most vociferous in opposing any change. Presumably they believe that there are great educational advantages to the system that they are part of. What is the explanation for that?

[56] **Professor Reynolds:** It may be a degree of cultural conservatism in wanting to stay

with something that you know, rather than moving to a larger setting that you do not know. It may also be that the media portrayals, and the absence in those portrayals of what area schools are like, have had an effect on teachers' perceptions.

9.50 a.m.

[57] It may be a desire for personal autonomy, but, in fairness to the teachers, my bet is that it reflects their sincerely held views that they do things better in a school of 20, 40 or 60 pupils, than in a school of 100 pupils. Given those sincerely held views—and this is not a researcher arguing for more research—the answer is more research, so that we can see whether those teachers are right and I am wrong.

[58] **Alun Ffred Jones:** You suggest that any savings resulting from school reorganisation should be ring-fenced within the local authority's education budget. Will you expand on your rationale for that?

[59] **Professor Reynolds:** I cannot really expand on the rationale. It came from Pembrokeshire and I do not think that all local authorities do it. My impression from Pembrokeshire was that it was quite rare, or that the authority itself saw it as rare. Its rationale was that you build political support and build a coalition in favour of closure by ring-fencing, so that everybody in the county knows, and everybody in education knows, that, if there are savings, the money will not be lost to education. Were the Pembrokeshire director here, he would probably say that, although Pembrokeshire has had protests about school closures, it has not been marked historically by the same scale of protest that other local authorities have had.

[60] I think that the director, were he here, would say that ring-fencing the money and ensuring that any savings are held within education is one of the reasons why his authority has seen less public protest than some other local authorities. For example, if there is going to be Assembly guidance on closure, which I think that there is—I would be surprised if it goes into this degree of detail about what happens post-closure; I think that it will be guidance about pre-closure reorganisation and closure—I think that this is the kind of thing that the Assembly could usefully recommend to local councils. It may be the kind of thing that you might usefully recommend too.

[61] **Brynle Williams:** Let me go back to buildings, please, Professor Reynolds. How does the target to improve all school buildings have an impact on the responsibilities of local government in Wales to determine the pattern of local schools?

[62] **Professor Reynolds:** I think that this is what is making life really difficult for local authorities. There is the desire to physically improve the physical plant and to make schools better and fit for purpose, yet there is not the capital resource to do that. So, if you are a local authority, you are under pressure to improve the stock of buildings and the amount of capital that you have might support taking one school of 100 pupils and making it fit for purpose, but it would not support three or four schools of 20 or 30 pupils being made fit for purpose. I think that local authorities' hands in this issue are tied by the inadequate capital spend that we have for education in Wales, so that closure is seen as a means of coping with a difficult situation. You have the targets that the buildings are to be fit for purpose, but you do not have the money to do it. That is the wrong reason for closure. The reason for closure should be things other than a shortage of money and capital spend.

[63] **Brynle Williams:** Could you expand a little more on your assumption that many may consider the findings of the study counterintuitive?

[64] **Professor Reynolds:** I think that it is because, as humans, as persons, we incline

towards the notion that small-scale is better. I think that it is particularly true in Wales, with its history—was it Leopold Kohr and the small schools movement? With the small schools that we have had, I think that in Wales in particular we incline towards that notion. Of course, many people have come to Wales wanting to live on a smaller scale. If you put all that together with the media coverage, which does not show larger scale—it never shows anything other than protesting parents—one is in a situation whereby, emotionally, one would incline towards thinking that very small is better than small, which is better than medium sized, which is better than large.

[65] **Brynle Williams:** Would you not agree, Professor Reynolds, that the media covers what is actually in front of it? When you see demonstrations such as those that we have seen in Powys, at which all the parents have been present, that shows that that is what the community is demanding for its pupils. That is democracy working.

[66] **Professor Reynolds:** Yes—

[67] **Alun Davies:** I think that you are absolutely right to say that, Brynle, but I do not want to discuss the media coverage of the issue; I prefer to discuss the issue itself. We are coming to the end of our allocated time for this session, so I want to complete our questioning of Professor Reynolds. I will bring Alun in first and then Mike.

[68] **Alun Ffred Jones:** In your recommendations, there is no mention of language impact studies when reorganisation is mooted. Do you think that such studies have a place in any sort of reorganisation, particularly in areas where there is a high percentage of people speaking Welsh?

[69] **Professor Reynolds:** We need research on this and on whether closure has a linguistic effect. My inclination would have been that there was; it was slightly surprising, and again, counterintuitive, that the Welsh language had not been weakened, in the views of the respondents. That may be picking up the fact that the Welsh language can benefit from critical mass. In fact, one of the schools in Powys that we mentioned was able to develop a Welsh-medium stream, given critical mass. I think that the school ended up with around 110 or 120 pupils; it was not able to have that stream before because it did not have the critical mass. The answer is to have more research to see what happens, but if we do that, I think that we might be surprised that the language could be as strong or stronger in a small school as opposed to a very small school, which is not to say that it would be strong in a very big school, or if amalgamation creates schools that are too large.

[70] **Michael German:** You mentioned earlier that new school guidance on closure is forthcoming. The Minister is reflecting on that at the moment and consulting on what it should include. I have a broad question: what do you think should be in the new guidance, either by extracting, or by adding to, what is already there? What changes would you make if you were writing this for local authorities? More specifically, in your report, you say that the needs of children should be paramount and that current guidance refers to the impact on the community and all sorts of other things. Do you think that those references should be taken out and that the guidance should deal with educational attainment alone? The second question is a narrower one.

[71] **Professor Reynolds:** One is dealing with a situation where multiple audiences and groups are affected by reorganisation. The most important group is children, but the community as a group—parents, teachers and so on—all have the right to express opinions and the interests of all need to be taken into account. It sounds like blather or it sounds unsatisfactory, but there is no alternative to listening to all the groups and trying to see where that would take you—

[72] **Michael German:** I am sorry to interrupt, but the guidance asks the local authority to take account of the impact on the community. Would you take that out?

[73] **Professor Reynolds:** No, I would not. I would want guidance that took account of the impact on a variety of stakeholders and a community, as an organised entity where people live, is a stakeholder, along with the children and other groups. I would not take it out under any circumstances, because the community is more than the individuals who live in it. So I would leave that in.

[74] This is not egotism, but I would be happy with all 16 recommendations being included, because I think that they all make sense. When I read the report, I think that the recommendations are above reproach. Interestingly, people have not criticised our recommendations; they might have criticised our data, but I do not think that they have criticised our recommendations. So, I would be happy with all of those going in and I would be particularly happy if the guidance was not just about the principles of doing the reorganisation, but about what happened while you were doing it and afterwards. In terms of a village school, for example, this is about taking the children back and forth, ensuring that coaches are available and ensuring that the old school can live on in the new by providing decent facilities in which to store things and by ensuring that relevant building work is done. I would go into post-reorganisation and the process of reorganisation, as well as asking multiple stakeholders, including community interests, before reorganisation. I hope that that is what the Assembly will do.

10.00 a.m.

[75] **Alun Davies:** Diolch, Athro Reynolds, am eich tystiolaeth y bore yma—yr ydym yn ei werthfawrogi'n fawr iawn. Bydd trawsgrifiad ar gael i chi yn ystod yr wythnos nesaf, gobeithio.

Alun Davies: Thank you, Professor Reynolds, for your evidence this morning—we very much appreciate it. A transcript will be made available to you, hopefully in the coming week.

[76] Bydd y pwyllgor yn cymryd toriad byr yn awr, tra'n bod yn gosod y cysylltiad fideo gyda Chaeredin. Yr wyf yn mawr obeithio y byddwn yn ailymgynnull mewn pum munud.

The committee will now take a short break, while we establish our video link with Edinburgh. I very much hope that we can reconvene in five minutes' time.

*Gohiriwyd y cyfarfod rhwng 10.00 a.m. a 10.05 a.m.
The meeting adjourned between 10.00 a.m. and 10.05 a.m.*

[77] **Alun Davies:** Can you hear us and see us?

[78] **Professor Bramley:** I can. I can hear you and see the group sitting at the back of the table; I cannot see the people to the side at the moment, if there are any.

[79] **Alun Davies:** Let us regard that as a triumph and move on.

[80] Thank you, Professor Bramley, for joining us this morning. We very much appreciate the time that you are taking to help us with this inquiry, which, as you are aware, flows from a petition that we received in the National Assembly for Wales on the closure of small schools. We are aware of the work that you have done on this issue, particularly the 'Alternative Resource Allocation Models for Local Services in Wales' study. We have all received a copy of that piece of work, but could you introduce for Members the salient elements of that study and some of the key issues that arise from it?

[81] **Professor Bramley:** The study was not primarily focused on small schools or services in small, rural communities. It was a much broader look at perhaps testing out a different way of analysing expenditure and the outcomes from services using education as the main example and working through the logic of using the best evidence that we have about the effects of different social, demographic, environmental and economic conditions on how those services perform and their cost. We wanted to see if we could come up with a slightly different way of rationalising and justifying the distribution of resources between local authorities in Wales. This differs—from the traditional method, which has been reliant on the historic pattern of expenditure—in other words, coming up with a statistical formula that mimics the historic pattern of spending.

[82] The approach that I suggested and developed in my report starts from a different point; it starts by asking what outcomes we are trying to achieve from these resources and from education. The outcomes that we focused on were the most commonly noted ones to do with attainment in tests and public examinations. We discussed with the client bodies different possible interpretations of that and ended up exemplifying various approaches to do with trying to raise the minimum standard of attainment or trying to narrow the variation in attainment, taking account of different sets of factors, but particularly factors relating to social deprivation, I suppose one would say. In order to work this through, one also has to have an understanding of the costs of schools, which depend partly on the pattern of provision, which depends in turn partly on the geographical settlement pattern. So, the research involved looking at that as part of the process. However, that was not the sole or primary motivation for the study.

[83] It is a long report. I am sorry; I am sure that you have not all had time to read all of it. However, there are particular points in the study where the issues that are of interest to you came up. There are primarily two questions from the analysis. The first is the question about what the apparent effect is, if any, of the size of schools on attainment, once you have allowed for other factors that affect attainment. The second question is: what is the effect of the size of schools on costs? Then there are the questions of what we should do about it and what it is reasonable to assume that local education authorities might do about those findings.

10.10 a.m.

[84] This discussion is mainly about the primary sector; in the secondary sector, the issues do not apply in the same way, but we could come back to the secondary sector later. The findings on attainment were that, on balance, the evidence seemed to suggest that, if anything, small schools have poorer attainment, but I will put a couple of provisos on that, which, again, you will probably want to come back to. It is not the most robust statistical conclusion, but there is no evidence that small schools have better attainment—there is no statistical support for that; the issue is whether their attainment is significantly worse than you might otherwise expect or whether it is not worse but average.

[85] On the cost side, the evidence is pretty unambiguous that small schools, particularly very small schools, have a much higher cost per pupil, per unit; it is easy to understand why that should be, and the evidence bears that out. So, if local education authorities that face a period of relatively tight resource constraints and not much real increase in resources are to make the most use of those resources, they will obviously look at any ways in which they can make their education systems perform more efficiently and effectively, and that is probably why there is renewed interest in issues of possible school reorganisation.

[86] I also refer in my report to other work done by the inspection agency, Estyn, which seemed to be coming up with a consistent message that one should perhaps question the educational value of some very small schools, and I summarise some of its thinking in my report.

[87] One other point to make is that it is important to remember that, in my analysis, school size is determined on the basis of the number of pupils enrolled. A school may be small because it has always been small and it was designed to be a small school for a small settlement, but it also may be small because it is half or three quarters empty—it might be an urban school that does not have many pupils, and the evidence relates to the mixture of the two cases. I guess that very small schools are typically rural but some of the moderately small schools may be in urban areas, and it is clear from the analysis that the scope for potential savings and benefits from reorganisation may apply in urban as well as rural areas, and I make that point.

[88] Is that sufficient introduction, Chair?

[89] **Alun Davies:** It is. Thank you very much, Professor Bramley. I will ask Members to put questions to you, starting with Alun Ffred Jones.

[90] **Alun Ffred Jones:** Am I right in saying that your report basically says that educational attainment is low in many urban schools in deprived areas and that you recommend a huge transfer of resources to such urban areas from rural areas, mainly, where there are many small schools? Is that a correct analysis of your report?

[91] **Professor Bramley:** I would put slightly different nuances on it. Yes, I am saying that the biggest problem causing low attainment is social deprivation in various forms, including poverty, and that that is more prevalent and concentrated in some urban areas, including, if you like, former mining and industrial areas, such as the Valleys. That is where there is perhaps the greatest challenge in trying to raise attainment. I believe that there are ways of putting more resources into education in such circumstances that would help to raise attainment.

[92] However, I am not sure whether I would agree that the transfer of resources is huge. What we exemplified would have been significant transfers of resources—in the order of 10 or 15 per cent of budgets; I do not know whether you regard that as huge. If we are just redistributing the same amount of money—and it depends how much the overall education budget moves in the next few years—the authorities that would get less would be a mixture of rural authorities and some that I would describe as being more dormitory areas for cities, namely some of the more affluent, accessible rural areas and small towns that are near major cities. Among the sparsely populated rural areas, there are different spending profiles and patterns of provision, so it may have a bigger effect on some than on others.

[93] **Alun Ffred Jones:** You are right to say that the areas that would see markedly reduced budgets in education would be places such as Monmouth, the Vale of Glamorgan and Flintshire, which, as you say, are not all rural.

[94] **Professor Bramley:** They are more of the accessible, commuter-type areas.

[95] **Alun Ffred Jones:** The WLGA stated in its response to your report that it was a complex and flawed piece of work. It is certainly complex—I can vouch for that—but whether it is flawed is not for me to say. However, are you happy that your method is robust and that your conclusions are the best way forward for Wales, despite the fact that it would mean a huge change, would it not, in patterns of education, particularly primary education, in many areas?

[96] **Professor Bramley:** There are a few questions there. There are questions of analytical robustness and of policy wisdom, which are perhaps different. As far as analytical robustness is concerned, I would not claim that the analysis that I have done in my report is

necessarily the last word on the subject. It is complex, and I believe that you need to go through a stage of doing some fairly complex analysis to do justice to the data and the issues, and to meet the brief that I was set. I was asked to explore the role of different factors that might explain and account for education—attainment for example. Therefore, we deliberately looked at a range of things and tested quite a lot of variables in our models. At the end of the process, I offered a potential way of simplifying it to make it a bit more comprehensible and perhaps ready to use in a more practical context.

[97] The broad pattern of results from my models for attainment—and indeed cost, but particularly attainment—are consistent with the other kind of academic and published research that is around at the moment on educational attainment. It is certainly consistent with results that I obtained previously in analyses carried out in England and Scotland. That is true in terms of the broad pattern of effects—the effects of deprivation, for example. The effects of the size of a primary school may be a bit more; as I say, there is some effect, but we can be slightly less confident about the exact magnitude of those effects. However, I would reiterate that I could not find any evidence from this that small schools were markedly better in attainment terms, once you have allowed for the characteristics of the pupils, their social backgrounds and so on.

[98] The policy wisdom question is another matter; I can comment further on that, but I do not want to go on for too long, Chair, if you feel that I have spent enough time on that question.

[99] **Alun Ffred Jones:** One of your conclusions is that

[100] ‘The consensus view appears to be that small schools are a poor option in educational terms’.

[101] You then cite the recent Estyn report as proving that assertion. What do you mean by a ‘small school’ and can you point me in the direction of the Estyn report that comes to the conclusion that small schools produce poorer educational results?

[102] **Professor Bramley:** Using the word ‘consensus’ may be a bit strong, because there will always be someone who disagrees. What I was trying to get at was that there was a range of opinion from people that I spoke to and from the Estyn publications, which were in line with what I was saying. My definition of a small school would be a school a quarter of the size of an average primary school in Wales, say, less than 60 pupils; the average is 244 pupils. It is in that range—once you get below half or a quarter of the average size, that you begin to see the effects on costs, for example, and potentially on attainment. Some of the smallest rural schools are much smaller than that—we are talking about a handful of pupils in some cases.

[103] I referred to two Estyn reports, one of which was specifically about rural small schools and reorganisation that I think was published in 2006, and the other report—which will be in the references in my report—was published in 2007 and looked at the experience of reorganisation and whether it had been a positive or negative experience in some cases. The first of those reports identified a number of educational challenges such as mixed age classes; small numbers of pupils in particular age groups limiting opportunities in sports and social interaction and peer group interaction; motivation; problems with having a small number of teachers increasing workload, reducing the ability to cover the curriculum and to provide supervision and cover; the schools’ greater vulnerability to staff changes or weak teaching staff; heavy workload on the head, who has to teach as well as manage things; and lack of modern facilities. So, those are the range of things that were identified in the Estyn report.

[104] **Alun Ffred Jones:** Thank you very much for that. Am I right in supposing that your conclusion is driven mainly by the relative costs of education and the resulting benefits to

pupils in more deprived areas from an increase in the resources given to them?

[105] **Professor Bramley:** Yes. It is probably fair to say that the primary driver for my shining the spotlight on possible school reorganisation—and the reason why local education authorities themselves, and possibly the Assembly Government, will be doing that—is cost, because I think that the running costs evidence is very clear. We are in a tight resource situation, so I think that it will encourage people to look at that. That is true whether the resources are used to help deprived areas or used to support other initiatives that may be promoted. I was suggesting, given the emphasis on looking at outcomes and the overall objectives, that that should be important. So, it is driven by cost—that is correct.

[106] **Michael German:** I am on the sidelines, so you will not be able to see me over here, Professor Bramley. I wish to refer to the paragraphs on page 50 and 51 of your report, which are about school size and organisation. In particular, I want to check with you that, where you say in the third paragraph down that the evidence about attainment could be worse than average—you explained that earlier, but I wonder whether you distinguished between small schools in deprived areas and small schools in rural areas. The level of deprivation is drawn from the index of multiple deprivation, so is there a distinction in your analysis between small schools in deprived areas and small schools in rural areas?

[107] **Professor Bramley:** The short answer is ‘no’, but the analysis does take account of all of those other influences. So, the models are simultaneously taking account of deprivation and, if it appears to be significant, the urban or rural character of the area. That is, as it were, allowed for in the analysis. However, I have not constructed a separate variable for small rural schools versus small urban schools.

[108] **Michael German:** Would your instinct be that analysing the location would produce a different set of results on attainment?

[109] **Professor Bramley:** It could be worth exploring. I suspect that the very small schools are largely in rural areas. This enables me to make a point that I intended to make when commenting on whether the analysis was flawed: the analysts at the Welsh Assembly Government who commissioned the work were pretty happy with it, and with the answers to various technical queries. The data are there, and others can analyse them further if they want to do so, or, indeed, you could ask me to do that, if you have the resources. It is possible to dig into the data and look at more detailed questions, and that would probably be worth doing. However, we have taken account of different aspects of deprivation and of rural and urban location in the models; it is not that we have ignored those factors.

[110] **Michael German:** However, you have not made a distinction between them—it is more a distinction between the size of the schools, small and very small, rather than between rural and urban settings. There is no evidence pointing one way or another on whether attainment levels in rural schools are higher or lower than elsewhere.

[111] **Professor Bramley:** No, there is not. There is a bit of evidence for that, although I cannot remember how strong it is, at primary level. There is some evidence that, in rural areas generally, attainment is a bit higher, when you allow for everything else. There is evidence for that. That is partly what I was getting at. There is another point there, but I will leave it at that. Carry on.

[112] **Michael German:** I will turn to the cost element now, which is mentioned on page 50. You say in the third paragraph that small primary schools cost significantly more, and, again, we are talking about rural schools here, because that is the focus of the investigation by this committee. I wonder whether your analysis took sufficient account of the increased travel costs that occur when a rural school is closed and pupils have to move—sometimes along

with parents, teachers and others who might use the school as a community facility. Did you include travel costs in the rural context?

[113] **Professor Bramley:** Yes, we did. An analysis of travel costs is incorporated into the overall analysis. We looked at potential reorganisation using two different methods, and one of them involved a simulation of a possible reorganisation process. We know the distance of each pupil from their school, because we have their postcodes and the locations of the schools, and we were able to calculate the change in distance for those who would be affected by a notional reorganisation, and we calculated what we thought the extra travel costs associated with that were. Again, this piece of work could be done in more depth, but, in a round order of magnitude, the extra travel costs were possibly about a quarter of the savings in the running costs of schools.

10.30 a.m.

[114] **Lorraine Barrett:** On page 35 of your report, you say that small schools imply more mixing of age groups, which is generally considered undesirable, that headteachers have less time for management, and that smaller staff numbers limit the ability to provide cover, supervision and specialist expertise. Can you expand on that? Do you have evidence of the educational consequences of all of this for those who attend small schools?

[115] **Professor Bramley:** No, for most of that I am drawing on the Estyn report. It is based on its inspection process and observations. The point about mixed ages is simply logical—once you get below the one-form entry size of primary school, then, inevitably, the schools tend to move towards having mixed-age classes. That is just a logical consequence of having a very small size school.

[116] For the rest of what you just mentioned, I am really re-reporting what Estyn has reported, and I do not have additional evidence in my study on those more detailed matters about the educational process in schools.

[117] **Brynle Williams:** Can you explain the relationship between a school's size and the costs and outcomes?

[118] **Professor Bramley:** This, to some extent, overlaps with what we have already discussed. The effects on outcomes are perhaps best summarised in my report in the little charts on page 34. The effects on costs are in the chart on page 45. I have put a few charts on page 34 to illustrate the fact that I was getting a stronger effect from the size factor in some years of the data than in other years, which is one reason why I think that there is a little uncertainty about it. Basically, however, those are size bandings in the chart, and band 1 would be for schools with fewer than 60 pupils—that is, anything with between one and 59, presumably. Band 2 is for schools with between 60 and 120 pupils. That may not be clear from the paper. The relationship has a curve in it, as you can see. That is what seems to be the best fit to the statistical data. We tested various ways of expressing the size to see whether the relationship is straight or curved, and it seems to be curved.

[119] When you look at the costs chart on page 45, you can see that the relationship is clearly curved. So, the smallest schools, those with between one and 59 pupils, cost £4,000 per pupil, other things being equal, and that figure drops quite sharply as you move to the next size up, after which it almost levels off, so that you have a line that converges on the £2,000 mark for larger primary schools per pupil. Does that answer your question?

[120] On the cost side, it is easy to think of how it arises in a common-sense way. Just to exist, every school has to have certain things in place: a headteacher, an office, a building and so on. You can think of that as a minimum fixed cost that is divided across a very small

number of pupils, which explains the higher unit cost in that instance.

[121] **Alun Ffred Jones:** Can you repeat your remarks about the number of pupils in band 2? What are band 2 and band 3, roughly?

[122] **Professor Bramley:** In the primary sector, band 2 would be between 60 and 120 pupils.

[123] **Brynle Williams:** In what way are differences more pronounced in the primary sector?

[124] **Professor Bramley:** Figure 5.1 on page 45 gives you the answer to that in terms of the cost effects. I cannot remember whether the size bandings are the same, I think that they are, but they may be different for the secondary sector. Basically, there is a limited relationship between cost and size. The penalty for being a small size in the secondary sector is very slight, because you do not have schools of the tiny character that you have in the primary sector. It seems to rise a little with the larger schools. Again, there is not much of a significant relationship between attainment and size in the secondary sector, so I have not bothered to include a chart to show that.

[125] **Brynle Williams:** Finally, what are the particular rural aspects of such issues?

[126] **Professor Bramley:** The rural aspects of—I am not sure that I quite understand your question, sorry.

[127] **Alun Davies:** The question refers to the pattern of school provision and whether the existing pattern of provision in rural areas has any impact on the attainment of pupils within those individual schools. Has your research demonstrated a distinctive pattern in rural areas?

[128] **Professor Bramley:** To be fair, we did not try to analyse the data separately for rural areas to establish whether the relationships are different in rural areas. We tried to fit a general model to the whole system, while taking account of rurality and other circumstances. It may be worth someone else doing some research on that.

[129] **Alun Davies:** I will bring in Alun Ffred Jones and then Lorraine Barrett.

[130] **Alun Ffred Jones:** You described potential reorganisation as ‘a win-win situation’. Can you explain a little more about that?

[131] **Professor Bramley:** There are opportunities, and I would stress that they exist in urban areas and semi-urban areas as well as rural areas, where school reorganisation could, at least in principle, offer several benefits. First, there are reduced running costs, because of the curved relationship that we just looked at. Secondly, there could be improved attainment, partly from the sheer effect of size, but also from other things. For example, reorganisation may provide an opportunity to change the management of weak schools, and partly because, if Estyn’s report is to be believed, the educational experience for children attending somewhat larger schools may be of a better overall quality. There may also be an opportunity to improve the buildings through capital investment, whether through the replacement or the significant improvement of existing buildings. There may also be some release of land or property through that, which would help finance that. So, there is a combination of things. It is a kind of an opportunity to achieve benefits through a number of routes, which LEAs might want to seize where appropriate.

[132] **Alun Ffred Jones:** Perhaps I am stating the obvious, but this is a very statistically based report. Am I right in saying that you have not tried to capture the impact on

communities of school closures or potential school closures in any way?

[133] **Professor Bramley:** You are right on both points. It is predominantly a statistical report; I held only limited consultation and discussions with key informants and so on. It was intended to be predominantly statistical. That is the first point.

10.40 a.m.

[134] On the second point about the effect on communities, I understand what people are saying there, but that goes beyond the brief of what I was really looking at. My children have been in primary schools and my family have tried to be involved in community activities. I understand from that the key role that primary schools, particularly, often play in local communities, and that the benefits to society of having healthy, functioning communities are very important—tangible and intangible—and it is worth ensuring that we do not lose those benefits. I think that that is very important. I suppose that that is why local authorities should look at these issues in a holistic way and think about other services and community issues in areas where they may be taking action, whether they are youth services, social work services or whatever. That might lead you down a path of getting out of the so-called ‘silo mentality’ to having a bit more flexibility between the budgets of different services, so that when a local authority is looking at facilities for services in a particular settlement, it will look at possible contributions from a number of different budgets to keep at least one key facility that can be a base for wider community involvement. That may be a school in some cases, but not in others.

[135] **Alun Ffred Jones:** I will just pursue one point. The suggestion is that resources be shifted to schools in what are termed ‘deprived’ communities to raise the educational attainment of the pupils there. Is there statistical evidence that pumping more money into such schools is really the answer to their problems?

[136] **Professor Bramley:** The evidence from recent statistical studies of attainment, including my own, which adopt an appropriate approach to how they take account of resources, shows that, on average, higher resources have positive effects when you have allowed for everything else. That has been an area of controversy and debate in past educational research. In a sense, just throwing money at areas without thinking about how it is used is probably not the most effective thing to do. There are certain ways of spending resources that I believe, from the various evidence that I have seen, could have more effects than others. There is more that could be done with certain pupils who have certain special needs, such as emotional and behavioural disturbance issues that are often related to deprivation and unstable family backgrounds. Those pupils have the potential to be turned around by more intensive intervention, and, if they are dealt with more effectively, they stop disrupting the education of everybody else. So, that is an example of a more targeted use of resources that I think would be worth spending more on. However, there are lots of other examples that educationalists would come up with. There should probably be more of a combination of those initiatives, rather than just a raising of the average ratio of teachers to pupils without thinking about what is going on in the classrooms and in various other activities.

[137] **Alun Ffred Jones:** Diolch yn fawr.

[138] **Michael German:** If I may, Professor Bramley, I will ask you three unrelated questions, but they are all relevant to what we have been talking about. In line with your original brief, on page 6 of your report, you were asked whether you could come up with a view on whether the weightings in the distribution of funding formula for sparsity and deprivation were appropriate. Can you tell us, in broad terms, whether you think that the current weighting that is given to sparsity in the distribution formula to local authorities

reflects the needs of those authorities with sparse populations?

[139] **Professor Bramley:** The general answer, to take those two questions together, is that the weightings on deprivation are not high enough, I do not think. On the weightings on sparsity, I was questioning how they are calculated. The system that I recommend would not necessarily lead to all sparsely populated rural areas getting fewer resources, but there is a wide variation between the sparsely populated authorities, so there should be a weighting. I was suggesting possible ways of recalculating that. It is more about cost than need, if you take my point. The cost of the structure of even the most effective provision will be higher in very sparsely populated rural areas.

[140] **Michael German:** In general terms, because this comes through the revenue support grant, which is used by local authorities in Wales for general public services, do you think that the current sparsity indicator is way out in its weighting?

[141] **Professor Bramley:** I think that it is on the high side, certainly relative to the weighting on deprivation, but I cannot give you a quantified figure. The model that I was developing was a little more complicated than a single sparsity figure for the LEA.

[142] You should be aware that the analysis is carried out at the level of schools and is then aggregated up to the level of LEAs. There are issues in this report about how LEAs distribute resources between schools, particularly in respect of deprivation where most local funding formulae give a very small weight to deprivation.

[143] **Michael German:** Thank you for that answer to my first question. My second question is different. On the new guidance that will shortly be issued by the Government on the closure of schools, we may want to make some recommendations on that. Your report leads us to think that you might wish to see changes in the guidance given to local authorities on the closure of small schools. Could you give us some idea of what you might want to be included in the guidance, to provide more appropriate measures for local authorities when making judgments on tackling school closures?

[144] **Professor Bramley:** I am not sure whether I can answer that question. It was not part of my brief to examine the existing guidance, so I am not familiar with it, and I not been asked to look at, or consulted on, the possible drafting of revisions to the guidance. In so far as you want me to discuss the nuances of a particular guidance document, I cannot really help you.

[145] I have tried to explain what my report says and some of the possible limitations of that, and I am not sure that I can go much beyond that. I made some general comments about the wider community issues and how local service facilities, whether they are schools or others, may contribute to those, but I am not sure what more I can say. I certainly have not been asked to feed into this exercise.

[146] **Michael German:** Given the analysis that you have undertaken, I presume that you feel that mention should be made in the guidance issued to local authorities of the impact on communities, which they should take into account when schools are to be closed.

[147] **Professor Bramley:** I personally feel that they should do that, and I would expect them to do that.

[148] **Michael German:** My third question is simple and basic. I have been through the references in your report and I was unable to find a reference to Estyn's reports on small schools and attainment. It may be the way in which I am looking at them, or it may be buried somewhere else. You may not have it to hand now, but could the committee have that

reference, so that we can look up that initial report?

10.50 a.m.

[149] **Professor Bramley:** If it is not in the references to the report, I apologise. I fear that you may be right about that, and I do not know why that is. I am sure that the secretariat could get hold of it through the Welsh Assembly Government for you.

[150] **Alun Davies:** I will ask our secretariat to look into that. Professor Bramley, if there is any requirement, we will come back to you on that, with your permission.

[151] There is one final question from Alun Ffred Jones.

[152] **Alun Ffred Jones:** I spoke to someone who had studied your report in detail—in greater detail than me, I must admit—and he said that one possible conclusion from your report was that the further a pupil travelled to school, the better the educational attainment of that pupil. That was one of the almost perverse conclusions that seemed to come from your report. Is that possible?

[153] **Professor Bramley:** It is interesting that you have asked that question, because I went back to check on that when preparing for this session. We had the data for where each pupil lived and, therefore, their travel time or road distance to school, and we tested whether that seemed to make any difference to their attainment. We also tested whether the average distance to school for all the pupils made any difference. The conclusions on the individual effect, certainly at primary level, were rather inconclusive: in some versions of the models, it appeared to be negative, but it was positive in others. So, there is no very strong evidence that the penalty is large from longer travel distance, but it is not that clear that we could argue that it is a positive thing either.

[154] In the case of the secondary schools, the overall longer average travel distance—for pupils in the school as a whole—seemed to be significantly positive. That may be picking up on several things: the general success and ethos of rural secondary schools or secondary schools that serve big rural catchments, or perhaps the phenomenon of parental choice in that pupils are travelling further distances because their parents have elected to send them to denominational schools, Welsh-medium schools or something like that. I am not quite sure why. It may be a proxy for something else. Therefore, the evidence does not support the idea that higher average travel distances for pupils at secondary school is a big penalty; if anything, it is the other way around.

[155] **Alun Davies:** Thank you, Professor Bramley, for your time this morning. We will provide you with a transcript of this morning's session. We are grateful for the time that you have taken in helping us with our inquiry.

[156] **Professor Bramley:** Thank you, Chair. I have prepared a written note in response to the questions that your secretariat advised me of and I will send that through afterwards.

[157] **Alun Davies:** Thank you. We would be grateful to receive that response.

[158] The next meeting of this sub-committee will be on Wednesday, 25 June, in two weeks' time, when we will continue to take evidence for this inquiry.

*Daeth y cyfarfod i ben am 10.53 a.m.
The meeting ended at 10.53 a.m.*