



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

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

**Dydd Mercher, 2 Gorffennaf 2008  
Wednesday, 2 July 2008**

**Cynnwys**  
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Inquiry into Education Provision and School Re-organisation in Rural Wales:  
Evidence Session

Cofnodir y trafodion hyn yn yr iaith y llefarwyd hwy ynndi 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 Welsh Liberal Democrats
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
Mervyn Benford	Y Gymdeithas Ysgolion Bychain National Association for Small Schools
Ann Keane	Pennaeth Cyfarwyddiaeth, Darparwyr Addysg, Estyn Head of Directorate, Education Providers, Estyn
Dr Chris Llewelyn	Cyfarwyddwr Dysgu Gydol Oes, Hamdden a Gwybodaeth, Cymdeithas Llywodraeth Leol Cymru Director Lifelong Learning, Leisure and Information, Welsh Local Government Association
Dr Bill Maxwell	Prif Arolygydd Ei Mawrhydi dros Addysg a Hyfforddiant yng Nghymru, Estyn Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education and Training in Wales, Estyn
Daisy Seabourne	Swyddog Polisi Dysgu Gydol Oes, Cymdeithas Llywodraeth Leol Cymru Policy Officer Lifelong Learning, Welsh Local Government Association
Arwyn Thomas	Arolygwr Ei Mawrhydi, Estyn Her Majesty's Inspector, Estyn
Steve Thomas	Prif Weithredwr, Cymdeithas Llywodraeth Leol Cymru Chief Executive, Welsh Local Government Association

**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 9.05 a.m.*  
*The meeting began at 9.05 a.m.*

**Cyflwyniad, Ymddiheuriadau a Dirprwyon**  
**Introduction, Apologies and Substitutions**

[1] **Alun Davies:** Diolch yn fawr am eich **Alun Davies:** Thank you very much for your  
presenoldeb y bore yma. Nid wyf am redeg attendance here this morning. I will not go

drwy'r datganiadau arferol, ond gobeithiaf fod pawb wedi diffodd eu ffonau symudol a'u BlackBerrys. Fel mae pawb yn gwybod, gallwch ddefnyddio'r Gymraeg a'r Saesneg yn ystod y cyfarfodydd hyn.

through the usual announcements, but I hope that everyone has switched off their mobile phones and BlackBerrys. As everyone knows, you can use Welsh or English during these meetings.

9.06 a.m.

**Ymchwiliad i Ddarparu Addysg yng Nghefn Gwlad Cymru ac Ad-drefnu  
Ysgolion Gwledig: Sesiwn Dystiolaeth  
Inquiry into Education Provision and School Re-organisation in Rural Wales:  
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[2] **Alun Davies:** Dyma barhad ein hymchwiliad i addysg, ac ad-drefnu ysgolion yn benodol, yn y Gymru wledig. Croesawaf unwaith eto aelodau o Gymdeithas Llywodraeth Leol Cymru, sy'n ymuno â ni ar gyfer ein cyfarfod wythnosol. Gofynnaf i chi gyflwyno'ch hunain ar gyfer y cofnod, er bod eich enwau yn ymddangos ynddo yn y Cofnod Swyddogol yn ddigon aml. Gofynnaf i chi hefyd gyflwyno'r pwyntiau sydd yn eich papur; cymerwch yn ganiataol ein bod wedi cael cyfle i ddarllen y dystiolaeth ysgrifenedig, ond os ydych am wneud unrhyw sylwadau agoriadol, mae croeso i chi wneud hynny.

**Alun Davies:** This is the continuation of our inquiry into the provision of education, and school reorganisations specifically, in rural Wales. I welcome once again members from the Welsh Local Government Association, who join us for our weekly meeting. I will ask you to introduce yourselves for the record, although your names appear in the Official Record often enough. I also ask you to introduce the points in your paper—you can take it for granted that we have had an opportunity to read the written evidence, but if you would like to make any additional introductory comments, you are welcome to do so.

[3] **Mr S. Thomas:** Thank you for your introduction. We are thinking of charging an appearance fee from now on. I will make some quick introductions: I am Steve Thomas, the chief executive of the Welsh Local Government Association, to my right is Daisy Seabourne, who is our policy officer on education, and to my left is Chris Llewelyn, our director of education. Behind me is Andrew Thomas, who is a student from Swansea University, and he is shadowing us today. We are not going to go into great detail about the paper; we think that it would probably be best to engage in a dialogue with you on it.

[4] We met for the first time with the new leadership of the WLGA on Friday, and you are aware of the changes that have occurred. We also met last week with a range of authorities, particularly those in north Wales, where this issue in particular—rural schools, surplus school places and the future of education in rural areas—became the key debate. We produced a document prior to the 'One Wales' coalition in which we set planning and school places as one of our key priorities. We have a lot of evidence here. We know that you are also taking evidence from other bodies this morning, including Estyn. From a local government point of view, this is probably the key issue facing us for the forthcoming period. We want to continue making progress but, as you know, that progress is proving difficult in many areas. We see very successful models of dealing with the future of rural schools in Wales, but we also see great difficulties across Wales. We met the leaders of north Wales last week, and it was no surprise that those authority leaders, particularly from Gwynedd and Anglesey, were talking about the difficulties that they had experienced recently in terms of potential school closures in their areas.

[5] We also know that we have a ticking time bomb, in the sense that there are a range of surplus places in Wales, which means that we are duty-bound to deal with the problems that

we have. However, there are a range of issues that go well beyond that, such as the provision and condition of school buildings in some rural areas. Some of the buildings are totally out of date. When we gave evidence to you in that very lively session on the foundation stage, we mentioned that a figure of around £1.8 billion would be required to update our school buildings across Wales. The problem is particularly pronounced in rural areas, where there are some very old buildings. Getting the necessary level of teachers and expertise into rural areas is also an issue that we have picked up on, and I notice that Estyn picks up on it too. On the process, for example, for closing small schools, you will be aware that one school in Ceredigion with two pupils took over two years to close as a result of the statutory consultation procedures.

9.10 a.m.

[6] So, we have put the evidence into our paper, and we are open to questioning. I do not want to make a large speech about it; I think that we all know what the issues are. I do not think that we are saying anything blindingly obvious on this issue this morning, but it is a massively important issue for us.

[7] **Alun Davies:** That is very helpful. I will ask the clerk to circulate the transcript of your session with the Finance Committee, because that included discussions on capital issues and issues around school buildings, which you cover to some extent in this paper and which I think would also be relevant to this discussion. When I read your evidence, Mr Thomas, one of the things that struck me was that there seemed to be a strong focus on the financial and practical issues. Do you see those issues as being more important than the educational issues?

[8] **Mr S. Thomas:** I do not think that we do but, in these tight financial times, we must take financial issues as part of the menu of challenges for us in terms of rural schools. You can see from the figures in paragraph 11 that rural authorities' costs in terms of per-pupil spend vary from about £2,000 per head to nearly £16,000. There is a huge variation in costs, and, in one sense, that distorts local education authority budgets. We and our members are hugely concerned; knowing the cost of everything is not the answer. Our members are hugely concerned about the vitality and sustainability of rural communities, and we are deeply aware—and you as AMs must hear this daily—that many people in rural areas see a litany of closures occurring there, whether that is in terms of post offices, small community hospitals or schools, and the result is that the viability of those communities is called into question. From our point of view, however, a range of drivers are pushing us, and we try to balance them, but the cost driver is one of the primary ones.

[9] **Alun Ffred Jones:** Dechreuaf drwy ofyn am y prosesau sydd yn ymwneud ag ad-drefnu ysgolion yn y gwahanol gynghorau. A oes cysondeb yn y ffordd mae awdurdodau yn mynd ati, ac a yw'r canllawiau'n ddigon clir parthed y prosesau hynny?

**Alun Ffred Jones:** I will start by asking about the processes involved with school reorganisation in the various councils. Is there consistency in the way in which authorities go about this, and are the guidelines clear enough with regard to those processes?

[10] **Ms Seabourne:** Consultation is a statutory process, certainly if you are looking at any major school reorganisation or school closure, and that is laid out in Assembly circular No. 23/02. So, there is a process that must be followed, which is firmly steeped in consultation with the community: with the children and young people in the school, parents, carers and other members of the community who would have an interest. In addition, the children and young people's plans, which are being written at present for all local authorities, must contain an element on investment in school buildings, which is linked with planning school places, access to school and things like parental preference. There is also a statutory process of consultation with those plans.

[11] **Dr Llewelyn:** To add to that, one of the things that may confuse the situation a little is that authorities are at different stages of the journey, in that the socioeconomic circumstances vary from authority to authority. The distribution of population varies between authorities, but, in addition, the demographic changes that are taking place do not take place at an even pace throughout Wales. The 22 authorities have embarked on the same journey, but they are at different stages of that journey, and some are more advanced than others. On a superficial level, there may be an impression that they are dealing with things in a different way, but the reality is that they are not; they are at different stages of that journey.

[12] **Alun Ffred Jones:** Yr wyf yn deall bod canllawiau ynglŷn â'r broses—a bu ichi gyfeirio at y ffaith bod ysgol â dau ddisgybl wedi cymryd dwy flynedd i fynd drwy'r broses honno—ond sôn yr ydwyf am efallai nid y broses statudol, ond y ffordd y mae cynghorau'n mynd ati. A oes angen mwy o gysondeb gan ei fod yn ymddangos i mi, yn fras iawn, bod dwy ffordd o fynd ati? Gallwch naill ai greu cynllun mawr a dweud, 'Dyma fe; dyma'r cynllun ar gyfer y sir, sy'n agored ac yn ddemocrataidd'—ond mae'n ymddangos i mi bod hynny'n wrthgynhyrchiol yn aml—neu gallwch ddilyn enghraifft awdurdodau eraill sydd fel pe baent wedi dechrau'n fwy lleol; am wn i, mae sir Benfro yn enghraifft o hynny. Mae hynny'n ddwy ffordd wahanol iawn o fynd ati. A ydych chi yn credu bod un yn well na'r llall neu fod un yn fwy derbyniol?

**Alun Ffred Jones:** I understand that there are guidelines regarding the process—and you referred to the fact that a school with two pupils took two years to go through a process—but I am talking about perhaps not the statutory process, but the way in which councils tackle it. Is there a need for more consistency, because it seems to me that there are, broadly speaking, two ways of going about it? You can either create a big plan and say, 'This is it; this is the plan for the county, which is open and democratic'—but it appears to me that that is often counterproductive—or you can follow the example of other authorities that seem to have started more locally; as far as I know, Pembrokeshire is an example of that. Those are two very different ways of tackling it. Do you think that one way is better than the other or that one is more acceptable?

[13] **Mr S. Thomas:** I think that it is the clear view of the association that the big-bang consultation approach that has been undertaken by a range of authorities, including Gwynedd, Denbighshire and Cardiff, is not necessarily the best methodology to use to close the schools in question. We saw a number of authorities, such as Rhondda Cynon Taf, Monmouthshire and Pembrokeshire, that, in effect, put very democratic consultation procedures in place, but did it on a much more localised level and in a much more incremental way. The classic example was the Cardiff consultation, where Cardiff produced a very glossy consultation document that set out very openly what its plans were, but the collective noise that emerged on the back of that consultation was considerable and thwarted work in other areas. Denbighshire's plan, of course, which was an announcement at one time to close a range of schools, also stumbled at that point. I think that the slower, incremental approach, on a locality basis, is tactically a much better way of going about this. From our point of view, if we were to give advice to our members, that is the type of advice that we would give.

[14] **Ms Seabourne:** I think that Chris has already mentioned that the authorities are at different levels and that is, in part, an explanation of how different authorities have approached that kind of consultation. If you look at places such as Pembrokeshire and Carmarthenshire, they started their school reorganisation back in 1996, so they have had over 10 years to take that much more incremental, slow approach, taking communities with them along the way. The authorities that Steve has mentioned have been under a certain amount of pressure from the Welsh Assembly Government, Estyn reports and the Wales Audit Office to push forward with school reorganisation programmes that, in a way, has led to them having to come up with some big plan to deal with the issues fairly quickly.

[15] **Alun Ffred Jones:** Un o'r pethau **Alun Ffred Jones:** One of the interesting

diddorol yng nghyflwyniad y deisebwyr o Bowys a gychwynnodd y broses hon oedd eu bod am weld cynllun cyfansawdd oherwydd eu bod yn meddwl bod y broses 'piecemeal' o gau ysgolion, fel yr oeddent yn ei alw, yn broses heb unrhyw resymeg iddi. Mae'n ymddangos i mi bod y deisebwyr yn gofyn am gynllun cyfansawdd, ond yr ydych chi'n dweud bod hynny'n aml iawn yn creu gwrthwynebiad ynddo'i hun.

[16] **Dr Llewelyn:** Byddwn i'n dweud bod angen ystyried yr amgylchiadau. Mae'r amgylchiadau yn amrywio ym mhob awdurdod, ond maent hefyd yn amrywio rhwng yr awdurdodau, felly y gwir yw nad oes un ateb sy'n addas ar gyfer pob ysgol na phob awdurdod ac mae'n rhaid ystyried beth yw'r amgylchiadau lleol ar y pryd ac edrych ar yr hyn sydd orau ar gyfer y ddarpariaeth addysg yn yr ardal honno ar y pryd.

[17] **Alun Ffred Jones:** Gwnaf orffen drwy ddweud bod yr Athro David Reynolds wedi bod o'n blaenau ac mae ei adroddiad ef i'r Sefydliad Materion Cymreig wedi cael cefnogaeth o rai cyfeiriadau ac wedi cael gwrthwynebiadau o leoedd eraill. Yr ydych chi, yn fras, fel cymdeithas wedi cefnogi adroddiad David Reynolds. A allwch ddweud wrthym beth yw natur y gefnogaeth honno?

9.20 a.m.

[18] **Dr Llewelyn:** Yn fras, yr oeddem yn cytuno â chasgliadau'r adroddiad a'r dull ymchwil. Yr ydym yn ymwybodol y bu beirniadaeth o'r fethodoleg ac o nifer yr ysgolion a'r achosion yr edrychodd y gwaith arnynt, ond y gwir yw ei bod yn bosibl bod yn feirniadol o unrhyw ymchwil. Hynny yw, nid oes methodoleg sy'n plesio pawb. Felly, yr ydym yn derbyn bod beirniadaeth, ond, yn fras, yr oeddwn yn meddwl bod y gwaith y mae David Reynolds a'r sefydliad wedi ei gyflawni'n gadarn ac y mae nifer o'i gasgliadau'n agos i gasgliadau'r gwaith ymchwil bu inni ei gynnal a'r adroddiad a gyhoeddwyd gennym. Byddwn yn trafod y gwaith gyda David Reynolds a'r sefydliad ymlaen llaw, ac ar ôl iddynt gyhoeddi'r adroddiad hefyd.

[19] **Alun Ffred Jones:** Casgliad hwnnw, at ei gilydd, yw bod rhieni, athrawon ac ati

things in the presentation by the petitioners from Powys who started this process is that they want to see a comprehensive plan because they think that the 'piecemeal' process, as they called it, of closing schools is totally without logic. It seems to me that the petitioners are asking for a comprehensive plan, but you are saying that that often creates opposition in itself.

**Dr Llewelyn:** I would say that you need to consider the circumstances. The circumstances vary in each authority, but they also vary between authorities, so the truth of the matter is that there is no one answer that is suitable for every school or for every authority and consideration must be given to the local circumstances at the time and to what would be best for the educational provision in that area at that time.

**Alun Ffred Jones:** I will finish by saying that Professor David Reynolds has been before us and his report to the Institute of Welsh Affairs has received support from some directions and opposition from others. As an organisation, you have broadly supported David Reynolds's report. Can you tell us about the nature of that support?

**Dr Llewelyn:** We broadly agreed with the report's conclusions and the research method. We are aware that there was some criticism of the methodology and of the number of schools and cases that the work looked at, but the truth of it is that any research is open to criticism. That is, there is not a methodology that pleases everyone. So, we accept that there has been criticism, but, on the whole, we thought that the work undertaken by David Reynolds and the institute was robust and a number of his conclusions are close to the conclusions of research that we undertook and the report that we published. We will discuss the work with David Reynolds and the institute beforehand, as well as after they have published the report.

**Alun Ffred Jones:** That conclusion is that, on the whole, parents, teachers and so on are

yn fodlon gyda threfniadaeth ysgolion ardal lle mae ysgolion llai wedi cau. Ond eto, mae pob tystiolaeth yr ydym yn ei chlywed gan rieni sydd â phlant mewn ysgolion bach sydd dan fygythiad yn dweud y byddai cau'r ysgolion yn eithriadol o amhoblogaidd a byddai'n chwalu'r gymuned. Sut ydych yn cysoni'r ddau safbwynt hynny?

satisfied with the arrangements for district schools where smaller schools have closed. Then again, all the evidence presented to us by parents who have children at small schools that are under threat is that closing the schools would be extremely unpopular and would shatter the community. How do you reconcile those two views?

[20] **Dr Llewelyn:** Yr ydym yn cyfeirio yn ein hadroddiad at Ysgol y Bedol yn sir Gaerfyrddin, sef ysgol ardal. Fel rhan o'r broses o greu'r ysgol ardal honno, caewyd tair ysgol yn y gymuned agos. Yr oedd rhywfaint o wrthwynebiad, ond yr oedd y broses ymgynghori'n eithaf llwyddiannus, ac mae'n amlwg ers agor Ysgol y Bedol yn ysgol ardal fod cefnogaeth gref iddi. Mewn ffordd, mae greu'r ysgol ardal honno wedi greu cymuned newydd o'i hamgylch. Yn ystod yr ymchwiliad, cafwyd tystiolaeth bod y patrwm hwnnw'n ymddangos mewn sawl achos. Lle yr oedd ysgolion wedi'u cau, yr oedd cymunedau newydd wedi'u greu ac wedi'u tyfu o amgylch yr ysgolion ardal newydd.

**Dr Llewelyn:** We refer in our report to Ysgol y Bedol in Carmarthenshire, which is a district school. In the process of establishing that district school, three other schools in the surrounding community were closed. There was some opposition, but the consultation process enjoyed a fair degree of success, and it is clear that since opening as a district school Ysgol y Bedol has strong support. In a way, creating that district school has created a new community around it. During the review, evidence was presented to show that that pattern is emerging in several cases. Where schools closed, new communities were created and grew around the new district schools.

[21] **Michael German:** I want to pick up on something that Daisy said, which was that some local authorities—forgive me if I paraphrase—felt under pressure from WAG, Estyn and the Wales Audit Office. Can you expand a little on that? Is this a concerted approach by all three bodies? Is there a unified agenda that all three share? Does that fall disproportionately on some local authorities? Are some local authorities put under more pressure by that?

[22] **Ms Seabourne:** I would not like to comment on whether WAG, Estyn and the Wales Audit Office share an agenda on this issue. However, certainly, authorities do feel pressure to address surplus school places and capital investment, which are, in essence, what make up planning for school places. Those are the main pressure points. That comes from all three of those bodies, I would say.

[23] **Mr S. Thomas:** It is consistent with the discussions that we had with the previous Minister for education and the current Minister.

[24] **Michael German:** Whether there is a single agenda?

[25] **Mr S. Thomas:** Not on a single agenda, but we are aware of the messages that come from the Welsh Assembly Government that are clearly picked up by bodies such as the Wales Audit Office and Estyn to the effect that there is a pressure—I would not describe it as a 'line'—in relation to local authority school provision. The First Minister also makes these points in debates in Plenary.

[26] **Michael German:** So, would you say that Estyn and the audit office pick up the signals sent by policy from the Government?

[27] **Mr S. Thomas:** Definitely.



[28] **Brynle Williams:** In your paper, you highlight the rural forum. Can you briefly outline its role? Has the issue of school reorganisations been discussed in the rural forum? If so, have any conclusions been reached?

[29] **Mr S. Thomas:** There have been preliminary discussions. The rural forum is a fairly new body, and it has dealt with a range of issues. We presented some of the issues to you in our last evidence session with you about rural funding and rural deprivation.

[30] The determination of the forum, however, is to deal with this issue collectively. There is a view, and this came out of my discussion with the north Wales chief executives and council leaders last week, that this issue now needs to be seen not just as a local issue, but as a regional and national issue. We were keen to support the process in Gwynedd as an association, we have been supportive of the process that has been undertaken in Cardiff, and the reason why we have done that is that we feel that this is a common problem for authorities throughout Wales, be they in rural or urban areas. The rural forum will be discussing this matter in detail, and so will the regional boards of the WLGA; in fact, it will be the theme of a special session of the north Wales board shortly.

[31] Going back to Chris's point, there are different problems: Anglesey and Gwynedd have a different set of problems to Wrexham, and even as we meet today, a special executive meeting is being held on the federation of a school in that area, which is causing some local controversy. From our point of view, the rural forum will have a massive role to play in this, and I think that we are due to engage with you during the Royal Welsh Show, and this may be one of the themes that we may wish to take up at that point.

[32] **Brynle Williams:** Following on from that, can you expand on the issue of the problems associated with having pockets of deprivation that tend to be dispersed or hidden and how that impacts on the delivery of education, specifically—and I emphasise that—in rural areas? How do local authorities across Wales take this into account?

[33] **Mr S. Thomas:** This was an issue that we raised previously with you along with the issue of how the local government formulae that are currently in place are broad-brush strokes, many of them based on the index of multiple deprivation, some of which do not pick up on these pockets of problems and deprivation. At that point, we raised the raising attainment and individual standards in education in Wales grant, which was based on the incidence of free school meals; the architecture behind that scheme was to try to push more money into more deprived schools, but probably within urban areas rather than rural areas. Anything based on those criteria would, I suspect, have an urban bias. So, there is a problem with the way that certain grant conditions are set out. They do not necessarily reflect what we would call a rurality test, but there was a limited amount of money available for RAISE, and it was a legitimate way of distributing the grant, if one that we disagreed with.

[34] **Lorraine Barrett:** We have talked about surplus places, but can you expand a bit on some of the challenges faced by local authorities in managing school places effectively, specifically the challenges faced by the rural local authorities?

[35] **Dr Llewelyn:** Many of the problems are ones of scale and population dispersal. In terms of our negotiations with the Assembly, in the past—and I am not sure that it is still the case—we often compared Newport with Powys in terms of the pupil numbers and the number of schools, where there were roughly the same number of pupils, but twice the number of schools. For authorities like Powys, the solutions that are open to urban areas in terms of dealing with pupil numbers simply do not exist. Transport costs are a significant issue for them, but solutions such as clustering schools or federations and so on are simply not practical, because of the distances involved. There are also a range of issues that relate to the

economies of scale, of which they cannot take advantage. As a consequence, the per-pupil costs of providing a similar service are disproportionately high. As a result, a superficial analysis of the situation gives the impression that some authorities are not using the funding that is available to them as effectively as others. This touches on the earlier point of authorities being at different points of the same journey; it misrepresents the situation.

9.30 a.m.

[36] Coming back to an earlier point, the reality is that all authorities in Wales share an understanding that dealing with surplus spaces is a challenge for them and that they have to use the available resources as efficiently and effectively as possible, particularly in the current circumstances. They do not really need the pressure of Estyn, the Wales Audit Office or the Assembly Government telling them that; I think that they realise that themselves. However, depending on their circumstances, the challenges that they face are very different.

[37] **Lorraine Barrett:** I will now look at raising standards. The audit office states that the desired outcome of any school reorganisation plan should be raising standards, and you say that this is particularly difficult for rural local authorities that have a high number of small schools; they may find it difficult to deal with the broad range of policy and curriculum initiatives that come from the Government. Can you say more about any particular difficulties in raising standards, particularly facing rural local authorities?

[38] **Mr S. Thomas:** The evidence here is somewhat contradictory. It is interesting that Estyn praises some of the educational standards in small schools, and, yet, the Reynolds report is fairly critical of the educational standards in small schools. To stress the point, in terms of the Reynolds report, if there was a fan club of the WLGA, David Reynolds would not be a member. In many respects, his report included some extraordinary findings, and more research needs to be done on what Reynolds did to try to back up his findings. If that report is true, in terms of its findings, for example some of the things that it said about the Welsh language and the standards in small schools, it presents a significant challenge for us all. We would be very interested to see what Estyn has to say about it today. Intuitively, however, our view is that the broad spectrum of education that you can get in a larger school cannot always be duplicated in a small school, and the result is that there could be an impact on educational standards. In a small school, of under 10 pupils, it is not possible to get the scale and level of experience that you can get at a much larger school. How does that impact on a child's education? The evidence is very contradictory, but I suspect that it does impact and, in some cases, it impacts in a detrimental way.

[39] **Lorraine Barrett:** May I just pick up on something that Steve just said? You have mentioned small schools a few times, and you mentioned two pupils in a school and 10 pupils in a school. We have asked many other organisations this question, but what do you consider to be a small school? There are small schools and very small schools.

[40] **Mr S. Thomas:** We have been asked this before. The Audit Commission in England says that a small school is 600 pupils in one setting. Reynolds talked about schools with fewer than 90 pupils. He talks of small schools and very small schools in the Welsh context, and I think that anything below 90 pupils was classified as very small.

[41] **Ms Seabourne:** The Wales Audit Office, Welsh Assembly Government and Estyn classify schools in Wales with 90 pupils or fewer as small schools. England, I think, works on a basis of 100 pupils or fewer, but none of this is written down anywhere in legislation or guidance. If you look at international research on small schools—some very robust studies have been done in America and Canada on the benefits of small schools, which have been mentioned by a few lobby groups in Wales—when they talk about small schools, they talk about schools with 400 or 600 pupils.

[42] **Michael German:** I have a few questions on paragraph 14 in your paper. In the first sentence you state that a number of rural local authorities have developed successful organisation and asset management plans, and in the second sentence you talk about authorities effectively managing school places. I will not take it that your first sentence means that some local authorities have not developed successful organisation plans. Can you tell me a little about what you believe to be a successful plan? What are the ingredients or the components that make a successful organisation and asset management plan?

[43] **Ms Seabourne:** We have already made the point that what works in one authority does not necessarily work in another, so there will be a lot of room for variation. We carried out some research on this, when we looked at the planning school places document, which is included on page 21, I think. We looked at the planning process and, certainly for a school reorganisation plan, you are looking at things like robust data on population studies, population movement within a county, projections of where people live, assessing parental choice, and the current school capacity within that area. It is slightly different when you look at an asset management plan and there is lot of guidance for local authorities on producing a school organisation plan, which is in the circular that we have already referred to. However, there is very little guidance on how to produce an asset management plan for education. So, there is a little bit of difference in terms of the guidance that is given. A successful plan will obviously be one that has been fully consulted upon and has the support of members within the local authority.

[44] **Michael German:** You have given us three criteria of what makes a successful plan in the WLGA's view, which is very useful. You have also told us that there is a lack of guidance from the Welsh Assembly Government on asset management planning, which might be something for the committee to pick up. One of the things that you did not mention in relation to the whole organisation and asset management plan was the broader impact upon the community. Does that also feature in your list?

[45] **Ms Seabourne:** Yes, it does. It figures very highly in circular 23/02, which covers school organisation planning; it is very clear that you need to consider the community and pupils in the school.

[46] **Michael German:** I would like to delve into the guidance. The current guidance talks about audiences, local education authorities, governing bodies, diocesan education authorities, the National Council for Education and Training for Wales; that is the audience for this circular. Given that the impact on communities has to be taken into account, do you think that the guidance ought to expand its scope and its audience to cover the broader aspects of local communities?

[47] **Mr S. Thomas:** I think that it should. There is a much wider process here. We were talking to one of your colleagues before we came into the committee about the role of local development plans, the planning of affordable housing, and everything that goes with that. From our point of view, community preference and community sustainability is an absolutely key point in terms of asset management. The pressures are twofold: one is financial, in terms of diminishing resources for schools; the second is the problem that we have in relation to the condition of the asset. The condition of the asset is not very good anyway, and that begs the question about the future of the asset. Because of that, there is a propensity to look at how you would take forward new-build in terms of school places. We want to ensure that we have a range of asset management plans that clearly set out to our communities the viability of their assets. That is the clear role of an asset management plan. It will not be a document that is sold at airports in the summer, but, at the same time, there must be an evidential base. If we are saying that a school is not fit for purpose, then the asset management plan is key to proving that, or otherwise.

[48] **Michael German:** Some revised guidance on this matter might help. You have identified a quite substantial gap in the guidance, but is there anything else in the guidance on which you would value a bit more?

[49] **Ms Seabourne:** There has been a concern over the meaning of ‘fit for purpose’. The Assembly Government has been clear that it wants all school buildings to be fit for purpose, although the date by which it wanted this to be completed has changed. There has never been specific guidance on what a twenty-first century school or a school for the future would look like or constitute.

[50] **Dr Llewellyn:** It is something that the committee might want to consider. The term ‘fit for purpose’ was used to a great extent in terms of the capital investment in school buildings without there being a shared understanding of it. One of our concerns is that thinking about planning places and dealing with the issue of capital investment and surplus places is seen within too narrow a context, without the wider considerations of the policy changes, such as the input of the foundation phase, 14 to 19 learning pathways and, specifically, community-focused schools. We know that, in England, the extended schools initiative has been very successful, but I think that most people would recognise that, in relation to community-focused schools in Wales, the momentum has not been generated. While everyone agrees that the idea of community-focused schools is a worthwhile and valid one, we do not seem to have a shared understanding of what exactly that means, and what it means in terms of community involvement.

9.40 a.m.

[51] On your last point on consultation with communities, there is a lot of evidence. I believe that everyone recognises that successful schools—schools that get good attainment levels and that raise standards—are the ones where communities have a high level of involvement. The research that the association has done on the ‘Narrowing the Gap’ project emphasises the importance of the link between communities and schools in terms of attainment. So, a range of things need to be taken into account when considering this issue.

[52] **Michael German:** Is there anywhere in the United Kingdom, or anywhere else, where the guidance on these issues is much more robust?

[53] **Dr Llewellyn:** We have not researched this issue extensively. However, Daisy seems to be nodding.

[54] **Ms Seabourne:** There is some research. Finland, for example, has done a lot of work on rural schools, and they have similar issues to Wales in terms of rurality and the size of schools, and how they organise their schools. If you look at how authorities work with the community in Finland when they develop plans—it is similar to what has been done in Wales—they ensure that they involve all community members and staff when they consider, specifically, asset management planning. Therefore, there is some international guidance.

[55] **Alun Davies:** Thank you both for the time that you have taken to provide us with a written submission, and for discussing this issue with us this morning. We will ensure that you get a transcript of this morning’s session in the next week or so. I am sure that we will continue our discussions when the report is published.

[56] Mae Mr Mervyn Benford o Mr Mervyn Benford from the National Gymdeithas Genedlaethol Ysgolion Bach yn Association for Small Schools joins us for the ymuno â ni ar gyfer y sesiwn dystiolaeth next evidence session. nesaf.

[57] Thank you for joining us this morning, Mr Benford. We have received a copy of your written submission, for which we are grateful. You are aware of and understand the inquiry and review that we are conducting. Members will have had an opportunity to read the paper that you presented to us. Will you please introduce yourself for the record, and then take about two minutes to introduce the main issues that you wish to bring out of your written submission? Members will then ask you some questions.

[58] **Mr Benford:** Good morning, and thank you for inviting me. I represent the National Association for Small Schools, which is a small charity that has looked after the interests of small schools since about 1978—it is our thirtieth anniversary this year. We work voluntarily, but we are committed to the concept of small schools. During our 30 years, we believe that we have amassed a considerable databank of hard, factual evidence of performance. We believe that the small school, which tends to be rural in character, but not necessarily—there are small urban schools now, and we find small inner-city schools emerging in our case studies, but, by and large it has been a rural model—is a wholesome, excellent model of education. It is ideal for young children at the start of their education, when so much is impressionable.

[59] By being particularly close to home, and well integrated with local people in a natural, local environment with which children are familiar, we have here a model of excellence that we would like to see available to all children, everywhere. However, it happens to be part of rural education and, as such, it is an important way through which people participate in rural life, and rural services. We see it as central to many other rural issues, such as jobs, employment, housing and transport. Therefore, we believe that it is an important model to protect. We hope that it appeals on a wider basis, but, for the moment, our concern is to help you to assess its worth and place in rural communities in Wales.

[60] **Alun Davies:** Thank you for that introduction, Mr Benford. It was very helpful.

[61] **Alun Ffred Jones:** Bu ichi gyfeirio sawl gwaith at ysgolion bach yn eich sylwadau agoriadol, ond a oes gennych unrhyw ddiffiniad o ysgol fach? **Alun Ffred Jones:** You referred several times to small schools in your introductory comments, but do you have a definition of a small school?

[62] **Mr Benford:** A definition tended to emerge professionally—and I have been a headteacher, teacher and school inspector—as being a school where the headteacher was necessarily part of the teaching establishment and took a class or, nowadays, a part-class. Speaking as someone who was headteacher for 15 years in a small school, I was a full-time teacher virtually all of that time. So, that is the definition. The number on the roll is arbitrary, because a headteacher can be free of a teaching class with somewhere between 120 and 150 pupils, although that will vary from place to place and between local authorities. So, any school where the headteacher is necessarily a part of the teaching staff we tend to regard as a small school. Ofsted, the English inspectorate, has defined a small school as being one of 100 pupils and we have tended to use that as a round number. Ofsted then defines very small schools as having 50 pupils and we tend to follow that definition, too.

[63] **Alun Ffred Jones:** Yn dilyn hwnnw, a oes pwynt yn cyrraedd pan fydd ysgol yn mynd yn annerbyniol o fach—o ganlyniad i gostau neu synnwyr cyffredin? **Alun Ffred Jones:** Following that, does there come a point at which a school becomes unacceptably small—as a result of costs or just common sense?

[64] **Mr Benford:** It is hard to say. People do say that, but we have no contrary evidence. For example, recently, the new Government in Scotland, led by the SNP, has deliberately kept open a school of two pupils. I was an inspector for eight years, and I did two school

inspections in Wales for Estyn. Inspectors are duty bound to report anything that appears to be disadvantageous to children's learning, but I know of no instance in which an inspection report has complained that the roll is too small.

[65] When the Isles of Scilly schools were created as a federation—in which a secondary school and the large primary school, on St Mary's, was combined with the three island schools—the secondary school was in special measures with the inspectors. The large primary school on St Mary's was causing concern, but the three little island schools with four to 10 pupils consistently got glowing reports from Ofsted. Some of our most effective reports came from schools in Northumberland and Cumbria that had between five and 10 pupils.

[66] Ultimately, as most research shows, the quality of education depends on the quality of the teaching and the leadership, and that can be good or less good in any school. Arguments are raised if something goes wrong in a small school, and reports will be more critical, but we do not analyse carefully enough what happens when something goes wrong in a large school. It can be difficult and just as bad for those children and for many more, and it may not be as easily detected or remedied. There has been too much focus on the alleged difficulties of life in small schools for children and for teachers, and that has possibly blinded us to the truth, namely that, as a species, and as a group of schools across the UK—and we believe this to be true in Wales, and we have looked at Estyn reports on schools in Gwynedd and Powys—the quality of education, which is why the children are there, remains at the best levels that we can get across the UK. That is the hard facts of testing inspection evidence.

9.50 a.m.

[67] **Alun Ffred Jones:** A gaf eich pwysu ar hynny? Yr ydych yn dweud bod canlyniadau addysgol ysgolion bach gyda'r gorau ym Mhrydain. Pa brofion cenedlaethol neu ddata sydd i gefnogi'r safbwynt hwnnw?

**Alun Ffred Jones:** May I press you on that? You state that the educational results of small schools are among the best in Britain. What are the national tests or data to support that viewpoint?

[68] **Mr Benford:** It goes beyond national tests. For example, in August 2006, the previous Scottish Government did a serious study of performance in all its schools, and came to the conclusion that, in the smallest schools—which were the pretty remote small schools in the highland and island communities in Scotland—children had a 25 per cent higher chance of reaching higher education. That is not just a test result in a national test at age seven or 11; that is an observation that shows that the quality of education is enduring in those circumstances. We believe that, in Ceredigion, which is a part of Wales that probably has the highest number of small and very small schools, the same level of quality performance at any level has been consistently shown. I have just received confirmation from the Cambridge policy institute, which did a study for the Commission for Rural Communities in England on choice in education in rural areas, that it too found that children from the smaller primary schools had a higher level of take-up of higher education. We believe that the quality of small schools extends beyond test results. They happen to achieve those test results, which always surprises people, and statements are still made—and, without making too much of it, one was made recently in Wales—to the effect that a small school cannot possibly survive without six specialist teachers. However, the evidence is just not that way inclined. Small schools are getting their results. 'A broad and balanced curriculum' is consistently the ruling of inspectors. Close relations with parents—

[69] **Alun Ffred Jones:** A gaf i dorri ar eich traws? Yr ydych newydd ddiffinio ysgol fach fel ysgol sydd â llai na 120 o blant, ac mae arolygwyr Estyn yn sôn am lai na 100 neu 90 o blant. Felly, a ydych yn cynnwys

**Alun Ffred Jones:** May I interrupt you there? You have just defined a small school as one having fewer than 120 children, and Estyn inspectors talk about fewer than 100 or 90 children. So, do you include such schools

ysgolion o'r fath yn y canlyniadau da hyn sy'n dod o'r ysgolion? Pan ydym yn sôn am ysgolion bach, mae perygl ein bod yn sôn am ysgolion gyda 10 neu 20 o blant, ond a ydych yn cynnwys ysgolion gyda 100 neu 120 o blant yn y canlyniadau hyn?

in these good results that are emerging from schools? When we talk about small schools, there is a risk that we are talking about schools with 10 or 20 children, but do you include schools with 100 or 120 children in those results?

[70] **Mr Benford:** No, we have evidence from the test results of schools that are exempted from publication in England because the test groups are too small. There may be only one, two or three pupils in the test group and they could be identified personally, so those results are exempted from publication. We were very concerned that, every year, there would be newspaper league tables of schools and their performances, but that these schools were consistently excluded, and so we asked the then-Department for Education and Skills to analyse the schools where there would be 70 children or fewer on the roll. They scored higher on all three test subjects and had a higher 100 per cent success rate in all three subjects than other schools, and that was also reported to the UK Parliament.

[71] **Alun Ffred Jones:** Yr oeddwn yn meddwl bod pob ymchwil addysgol yn dangos mai ansawdd y cartref a chefnidir teuluol sydd bwysicaf o ran cyraeddiadau addysgol yn y pen draw, a'i fod yn bwysicach hyd yn oed nag ansawdd yr ysgolion. A ydych yn anghytuno gyda hynny?

**Alun Ffred Jones:** I thought that every piece of educational research showed that it is the quality of the home and family background that was ultimately most important to educational achievement, even more so than the quality of schools. Would you disagree with that?

[72] **Mr Benford:** No, I agree with you absolutely. The most recent research that I read said that up to 50 per cent of all educational outcomes still reflect home background, which is why we are very concerned that we should promote small schools and defend them, where they exist, because they are closer to home than anywhere else. In my 15 years of experience, I have been in every single kind of house. I cannot mention names, of course, but I have known children who were rarely washed, and I could go to the playground and say to the mother, by her Christian name, 'If you do not sort that out, that child will have a really hard time when they get to secondary school'. The relationships between small schools and parents, and with the local people in the community are profoundly important. All our Ofsted reports picked that up.

[73] When it says that the quality of a school is such, they report that that is because the head is a teacher. They commend that for the following reasons: they are then closer to standards, being a teacher; they play a part in the direct planning of work, in the short and long term; Ofsted talks about the contribution of parents and members of local communities, such as artists, sculptors, vicars and so on, and how that supports the curriculum; and about the proximity of real learning environments, such as farms, fields, hedgerows, rivers and so on, which helps the children to identify with the school subjects that we call 'history', 'geography' and so on. As we said, it is a very wholesome model, because it is close to home. We think it rather sad that we cannot develop a system or an organisation, particularly in rural areas where there are other service issues, that could value that, support it and protect it.

[74] **Alun Davies:** Brynle, gwn fod angen i chi adael cyn bo hir, felly ewch chi nesaf.

**Alun Davies:** Brynle, I know that you have to leave soon, so you can be next.

[75] **Brynle Williams:** Could you offer a view on how the concept of the impact on a community could be measured?

[76] **Mr Benford:** Do you mean the impact of education or the impact of service provision?

[77] **Brynle Williams:** Service provision.

[78] **Mr Benford:** I think that it has to be something to do with the extent to which individuals can take part in things and the distance from facilities and services. In my village, a few years ago, at the annual meeting of the British Legion, it was looking for volunteers to collect prescriptions from the surgery, 3 miles away, because some of its members could not drive any more, certainly not on dark nights. So, access has to be the way to measure it, but I am not a statistician and so I am not quite sure what the tools would be.

[79] **Lorraine Barrett:** Mr Benford, could you tell the committee the nature of your reaction to Professor David Reynolds's report? You responded to his findings late last year.

[80] **Mr Benford:** Putting it in layman's terms, the study purported to measure the impact of amalgamating schools, and one claim that it made was that it would be measuring the results of the children's performance. However, Powys provided no results and Pembrokeshire could provide only the results up until the testing had stopped, because Wales—very wisely, in our view—withdrawed the requirement to test. In effect, Professor Reynolds did not have any results that he could usefully use to assess whether the children were getting better results here.

[81] There were other factors that seemed very odd to us, although we are not experienced researchers. However, when we met at the conference where he presented his findings, and asked how he had selected the handful of individuals whom he interviewed, we were told that they were selected by the schools that had benefited from the amalgamations. That is just not standard research practice. However, his work has been peer-reviewed, and an eminent social sciences researcher has done a critique that is based more on the statistics and the performance and so on, and I would just like to read her conclusions to you. It is quite a detailed paper. This was the tenor of our reaction in the article that was published in the newspaper. This is by a lady called Liz Spencer, a Shropshire professor of social sciences.

[82] 'This is one of the most amateur, ill-conceived, and thoroughly bad pieces of research I have seen in a long time.'

[83] It really is. She also says,

[84] 'If this is the kind of evidence used in evidence-based policy, heaven help us!'

10.00 a.m.

[85] This is the peer review of that research. Anyone really looking at the terms of reference of the research would realise that it was not the right time to undertake that review, and it was just a very small case study. She makes the point that case study work is not the best way to approach these issues if you want to draw general conclusions, because case studies have particular local contexts. I could go into more detail, but our reaction was that it was a very shallow piece of research and that it is not the kind of information that usefully guides policy. Of course there will be people who quote it; it was put to peer review in Shropshire because the authority in Shropshire was quoting it to partly justify its closures, and I believe that it is being cited in the new consultation document of the Carmarthenshire authority. It is important that a proper, detached review of its validity is aired. Thank you for asking the question.

[86] **Michael German:** To be fair, Professor Reynolds says that there needs to be more research into this area—a researcher asking for more research is like a dog asking for more bones. However, one of the things he talks about, which I would like to ask you about, is the question of the impact of school buildings. Many of the very small schools that we talk about



are housed in Victorian buildings, which are very old and require a fair degree of modernisation, and bringing them, collectively, up to the current standard would add a lot to the burden of local authorities in terms of their spending plans. Do you think that the necessity to make schools—we have used the words ‘fit for purpose’ in Wales, but we have just heard evidence that ‘fit for purpose’ is not defined—applicable and useful, in general terms, for modern education has been a driver that has driven local authorities to consider closure, more so than the education provision, or is it much more to do with the number of teachers and moving teachers around to get qualities of scale?

[87] **Mr Benford:** It is evident to us, and this is included in the Carmarthenshire document, that the biggest driver for these kinds of proposals and this kind of thinking has been the debate about surplus space. We, as an organisation, were set up when Shirley Williams and James Callaghan, in that Government of 1978-79, first noticed that the birth rate had fallen and was creating empty space and started to put pressure on local authorities to rationalise. Staffordshire closed a slate of 20 tiny schools in the Moorlands district, and we were founded as a result of that. That pressure has not gone away, because it is difficult for local authorities to rationalise surplus space without doing what the new funds for buildings for the future are doing in England, for example. Wood Farm Primary School in the city of Oxford is going to be completely demolished and rebuilt under those funds. That means that if Wood Farm school, as an urban school—and the Audit Commission always said that surplus space was a major urban problem, not a rural problem—currently has 70 or 80 surplus spaces, it will not have them in the future, because it is going to be completely rebuilt.

[88] On the issue of surplus space in rural areas, we have twice received letters from Ministers—obviously, this only applies to English schools—saying that surplus space should not be a reason for closing a village school because of the other value of the school to the community. In fact, the Department for Children, Schools and Families changed the 25 per cent rule and said ‘or 30 places’. There were efforts to protect village schools from being the target, and they are very easy targets—if you close a village school, you can mop up 20 or 50 surplus spaces at a time. The real driver for change has been the battle about surplus space, which is a pity, because it is virtually redundant now. Carmarthenshire notes that it had a rising birth rate of 1 per cent. I have figures from Scotland last night, which show that, there, significant increases are predicted in rural populations, particularly in rural areas within driving distances of towns and urban facilities. In addition, the birth rate in England has risen to the level at which it was when it started to fall. So, the issue of surplus space has almost gone away because of the change in birth rate and the out-migration from town to country that is going on, I believe, across the UK, although I am not so familiar with the pattern in Wales.

[89] However, local authorities have responded by trying to say that these schools cost too much, that there are questions about their performance, that there are mixed age groups, that there are small peer groups, and all the usual stuff that we have heard for 20 or 30 years, but the evidence of the results just does not bear that out. In fact, good, professional, quality teaching is the other 50 per cent—50 per cent comes from the home and 50 per cent comes from the quality of teaching. The quality of teaching is independent of buildings. I taught in two thatched, Victorian school rooms, built in 1837. We had so many cables running around the ceilings inside the classrooms that it looked like Clapham Junction, and if we ever had heavy rain, for example, two solid days of reasonable rainfall, it started to leak. We just put a bucket underneath it and measured whether there was more water than last time and did some really interesting mathematics work on it. In the end, the quality of schools comes from the teaching.

[90] **Alun Davies:** I would not want my daughter to be taught in a school like that; I would be appalled if my daughter was being taught under those conditions. Any reasonable parent would want their children taught in the most up-to-date, modern facilities, not pre-Victorian slums.

[91] **Mr Benford:** That was not a pre-Victorian slum; it was a particular problem with that particular roof. However, research published last year, and this was reported in *The Times Educational Supplement* in the autumn, said that the majority of good, sturdy stone buildings that you find in many areas in England—my school was in a flat area—are secure, sound and have a better carbon footprint than most of the schools that were built in the 1970s and later. You cannot generalise in the argument about buildings. There are many factors with regard to old buildings that are more positive. The Scottish Government has just found that it is cheaper to heat, light, maintain, repair and clean old school buildings in small villages than to bus the children three, four or five miles to an alternative.

[92] **Michael German:** Can I pick up a point that you made at the beginning of your contribution about the way that guidance or communications with small schools in England has altered. Was I right in picking up from you that the general thrust of the guidance from the Minister in England was that surplus places had to be taken out, and that now that there was a rethinking of this matter, there had been some rowing back on that? You said that you have had letters from Ministers, which presumably indicates that there are general guidance changes to the way in which the policy is being implemented—and, by the way, it is true that, for the second year running, the birth rate in Wales has gone up.

[93] **Mr Benford:** There has not been a significant change of heart. The Government is still trying to force village schools to federate. In England, it has gone for what I call big organisation—all-age schools are coming in. Cumbria proposed a slate of all-age schools in its document for buildings for the future, there is an all-age school in Telford, and there is one in Darlington, which is an urban model. The Government in England has this concept of extended services, and it says that it is easier to provide those services on an area basis, so local authorities are consulting as to how they can best provide those services to small village communities. It wants to group them and put them under single unitary management. We believe that that is totally unnecessary, because most small villages do not want the whole slate of community services; for example, they rarely want a Victim Support branch in the community, although there may be exceptions. However, the concept of providing a big slate of extended services is not necessary in rural areas, and there is no reason to take away the schools' autonomous, independent, well-serving headteacher and governing body for that cause alone. So, the pressure has not gone away; perversely, it persists, in that surplus places are the reasons for these plans.

[94] **Michael German:** I was trying to probe what your letters from Ministers were saying.

[95] **Mr Benford:** The letters from Ministers were saying that, ever since 1998, rural schools have been an exception in Government thinking. In 1998, the Government said in circular 98/101 that it wanted an end to wholesale closures, but what is happening at the moment is that there are proposals from LEAs across Britain—we have had problems in Scotland as well as in England, and I think that they are happening in Wales too—to close large numbers of village schools because of this surplus space argument.

[96] **Michael German:** So, the letters from Ministers are not amplifying or changing the previous guidance.

[97] **Mr Benford:** The guidance for local authorities on closing small schools has been significantly toughened, as it has in Scotland, where the presumption against closure has now been introduced. So, the protection is there in theory, but there is little sanction against a local authority that chooses to go its own way.

[98] **Alun Davies:** In the evidence that we received from them earlier today, representatives of the WLGA noted that, in some local authorities, spending per pupil varied from something

like £2,000 per head to nearly £16,000 per head. I find that disparity pretty grotesque, because I, as a parent, would expect the same money to be spent on my child's education as is spent on the next person's child's education. Is it not the case that, in some areas, you have people in larger schools subsidising the education of people in smaller schools? Is that not a fair approach to take? Should we not treat all children equally?

[99] **Mr Benford:** One should treat all children equally, but, in principle, that is what a differential staffing system does. The staffing of the schools with just two teachers is deliberately more expensive—and it is protected by lump sum ring-fencing and so on—because that is the way to provide the measure of curriculum coverage, teaching competence, and experience in those schools that is provided, it is believed, in larger schools by their having larger classes in larger organisations. We know that there are many successful and effective large schools, and if you analyse them and look at their reports, you will see that, for them, it is about the same qualities: the professional vision and dynamic leadership of the headteacher and having a team of teachers that follows absolutely and is loyal to the concept that is being advanced. However, what the best large school cannot do is have that close relationship with home. That close relationship with home is economically supportive. The Nisbet study at the University of Aberdeen for the former DoE made the point that the contribution from the parents and the community, and the reverse contribution from the school to the community and the parents, has economic worth. We insist that measuring by unit cost is an unfair way to measure, because it is the only measure and, therefore, it is rather shallow. There are other factors. For example, the school is often the only return that rural council tax payers and tax payers get for their money, which is spent on providing services in towns, including those in rural areas. So, there is a different way of looking at it.

[100] Another issue, of course, is value for money. We see countless reports—and I am sure that you can find these reports in Estyn's database—whose concluding remark is, 'This school is good value for money'. We must have a different way of looking at those figures, and there is one very easy way to look at them differently. I carried out a study for Oxfordshire, and I looked at 17 local authorities' unit costs and the range that was there, and I found that the number of teachers employed in a county like Cumbria—which is a very rural county with many small schools, which Cumbria might want to close—is no more than 6 per cent to 8 per cent. Half of those will be needed wherever the children are educated, and, in fact, there is no big pot of money draining away, as the startling figures would seem to imply. It is not a big pot of money draining away either from the urban poor, which is an argument that has been put to us and we have respected, or from other schools, as headteachers often say. West Sussex carried out a study and, at its small schools conference about eight years ago, it told all of the heads present, 'If we closed all of your two or three-teacher schools, we would be able to give a one-off payment to the other schools in the county of £50'. We know of no studies, but please correct me if you know of any, that show that savings ever materialise. There are long-term costs in transporting children elsewhere so that you can keep the unit cost figure down by having more bodies and fewer teachers. Ten years after a school is closed, people begin to come to the conclusion that it may have been cheaper to keep it open, and that is what the Scottish evidence is now showing. We also have figures from Shropshire, where there is a lot of research going on into transport.

[101] **Alun Davies:** That is interesting. I disagree with your assumption that the school is the only payback that rural taxpayers get. I think that we all understand that the provision of any service in rural areas is more expensive than it is in urban areas, and the local government settlement in Wales reflects that, so I would disagree entirely with that proposition.

[102] You mentioned 'startling figures', and I would agree with you on that, but it is surely the case that, in many places, you have some very poor communities that are, effectively, subsidising a very expensive education for a tiny minority of children. Surely it is the role of local authorities or Government to ensure that all children receive a similar or equitable

standard of education wherever they live in our communities.

[103] **Mr Benford:** You could say that in any situation where every child did not cost exactly the same amount. If you look at the unit cost figures in urban areas, you will find a startlingly wide range. So much depends on the individuals involved: the salary scales of the teachers and the head, their length of service, and so on. I would argue very strongly that it is not enough as a measure on its own, especially when you say that £16,000 per pupil is expensive; it is not expensive if it is only a tiny per cent of your overall budget. It is not costing the other children very much at all. It looks frightening; it always does. If county councillors who have given their lives to civic duty and who really believe in what they are doing get only that one piece of information, it is very difficult for them to work out the economic value. There was a project in America called Head Start, which was a well-defined and well-researched project. It was an urban project designed to do exactly what small schools do almost for free; that is, to bring parents and teachers together more in partnership. The net result of the Head Start project was that the reductions in the cost of educational failure later in the process of education and the enhanced learning of staying longer at school and getting higher attainment, better qualifications, better jobs, and more taxes back to the Exchequer meant that the project was delivering a profit of between four and 15 times the original investment. Our argument is that billions of dollars were spent trying to create the conditions in the big urban city schools of San Francisco, Chicago, and New York, but small schools do that for free, for those slightly extra differentials. They bring parents together in that same effective way. That is the evidence from Scotland: small communities, close to parents, more enduring results, more children going on into higher education and, as a result, profit delivered back.

[104] I am sure that if anyone did some serious research on the cost of all of the problems that we have with alcoholism, criminality, and vandalism in society in general and tried to connect it to small schools, you would not find much of a connection at all. I am sure that small schools are saving money in terms of reducing levels of later educational failure and more enduring success. That is why we need a more sophisticated economic analysis. Any businessman worth his salt would say that that was a good economic investment. That is why we have moved on from defending rural schools, because they are a part of the rural community and rural life. We would like to see the concept of the urban village in urban areas, with small units close to streets and serving a couple of streets, not whole estates, with perhaps 70 to 100 pupils. They could be networked and federated under one head and one governing body across 1 square mile of territory. We think that that is a profound argument for improving the education that is available in our urban areas.

[105] **Alun Davies:** Mr Benford, thank you very much for your time. I am sure that this is a conversation that we could continue at length.

[106] **Alun Ffred Jones:** You have made much of the relationship between parents, teachers, and the community with regard to rural schools, and you emphasise that that has its advantages. You referred to Shropshire; one of the startling facts that came out of that proposed programme of closure was the large number of pupils who were being bussed to schools. They were classified as being small and rural, but, in fact, they were anything between 40 and 90 in number and the pupils were being bussed in from towns and larger communities. How does that fit into this idyllic picture of the relationship between teachers and the local community? They were coming in from outside the community. Is that a bad thing for the children, being bussed in from other communities? Does their having to travel to these schools have a detrimental effect?

10.20 a.m.

[107] **Mr Benford:** In the end, the quality of education is in the relationship and partnership between parents and teachers. That is the bedrock and the foundation. What is happening here

is being achieved by a policy that, politically, we call choice. We can debate the validity of choice for a long time. The odd thing is that the Commission for Rural Communities in England has found that living in a rural ward guarantees better results across the board, including in secondary education, and yet there is minimal choice.

[108] **Alun Ffred Jones:** You have said that many times. What I am referring to are the pupils being bussed in from outside—

[109] **Mr Benford:** That is choice.

[110] **Alun Ffred Jones:** Yes, I understand that it is choice, but what I am asking is whether that has a detrimental effect on those pupils. You seem to suggest that, if you go the other way, it is bad for them, but is taking pupils in to these schools a good thing or a bad thing, or does it matter?

[111] **Mr Benford:** The results are the thing. If they get good results, it must be a good thing for them, or are you suggesting that travelling itself is a problem?

[112] **Alun Ffred Jones:** You have been suggesting that travelling is a problem, so—

[113] **Mr Benford:** Only financially. It takes children who are already close to the school and home away, which is unnecessary.

[114] **Alun Ffred Jones:** Yes, but these pupils who are being bussed in also come from outside the community, so does that harm the community that they come from, or is it bad for the pupils, or the families?

[115] **Mr Benford:** It is an additional dimension. Our debate is about the value of the small school to local communities. If, on top of that, people are enabled by political decisions about choice, I cannot see any problem with that because the results are good.

[116] **Alun Ffred Jones:** I presume that they would therefore be well-off parents, who are able to bring their children in by car in the morning.

[117] **Mr Benford:** You could argue the other way. There was a parent who, at a consultation meeting in Cheshire last year, asked, ‘If you say that the bus can take our children to Nantwich, why can’t the same bus, which has to make a return journey, offer to bring the children of parents who do not have transport into our school?’. We are touching on issues that go beyond the quality of education, but it is the quality of education that is driving the choices, and, at present, I want, and NAAS wants, that quality of education to be more widely available in the town and country.

[118] We believe that there are ways forward to do that, and we believe that the pattern of provision in the next 20 years will be quite different from what we are used to. We are building all these standard, but better, buildings in a time when we have the super-computer and so many technological developments that will change the whole pattern of future provision anyway. Therefore, let us stay close to home, and let us try to get close-to-home experiences in towns and cities, which, at present, we do not, so that people are enabled by choice. You are right that if they drive, and have cars, they will come from a better-off section of the community.

[119] However, there are many poor rural communities. Lincolnshire, for example, has one of the lowest average incomes in the whole of England. There is a lot of deprivation in many parts of rural England—it is not all, as Professor Reynolds says, the counties around the metropolitan centres, such as Middlesex, Surrey, and so on. It is a pity that he mentioned that

in his introduction. We believe that, in counties such as Lincolnshire, the provision of a school, albeit only for 20 local children, is of a high quality. If that school can be kept open because it attracts other pupils, that is another factor. We would say that the school of 20 is worth keeping open any way, but local authorities may not say that, and therefore you get a kind of cross-current of many personal, social and professional dilemmas. However, the hard fact is that small schools are effective, they are wholesome, especially in a climate of increasingly 'toxic childhoods', as the phrase goes these days, and we believe that they provide your rural communities with a tremendously valuable service. The inspection report seems to show that.

[120] **Alun Davies:** Thank you for your time, Mr Benford. I am sure that we will continue this conversation. A transcript of this morning's session will be made available to you. We are grateful for the time that you have taken to come here to answer our questions this morning, and also for providing us with a written submission to this inquiry.

[121] **Alun Ffred Jones:** Can we ask Mr Benford for the information from the Scottish experience that it is cheaper to heat old buildings than transport pupils? He also referred to another batch of information from Scotland, which it would be useful for us to have.

[122] **Alun Davies:** We will check the transcript and write to you, Mr Benford, and ask for that.

[123] **Mr Benford:** I can provide copies of the Scottish documents.

[124] **Michael German:** Could we also have the letters from the Ministers?

[125] **Alun Davies:** All that is on the record and in the transcript and we will write to you, Mr Benford, and ask for additional information. Thank you again for your time.

[126] **Mr Benford:** Thank you.

[127] **Alun Davies:** Our final session this morning is with Estyn. I invite Dr Maxwell, Ms Keane and Mr Thomas to join us at the table.

[128] Diolch am gynnig tystiolaeth y bore yma. Mae'r Aelodau wedi cael cyfle i ddarllen eich papurau a gwerthfawrogwn y papurau hynny. Thank you for presenting evidence this morning. The Members have had an opportunity to read your papers and we appreciate those papers.

[129] Gofynnaf i chi gyflwyno eich hunain a rhai o'r syniadau a'r prif faterion sy'n codi yn eich papurau yr hoffech eu nodi. Please introduce yourselves and some of the ideas and main issues that arise in your papers that you would like to note.

[130] **Dr Maxwell:** Thank you, Chair. I will introduce my colleagues. On my right is Ann Keane, who is head of our providers directorate, responsible for school inspections across the country. On my left is Arwyn Thomas, who has a great deal of experience in this area. He works closely with local authorities in north Wales and has been involved in a range of specific remit work that has looked at relevant topics around this. We have provided some remit reports with our written submission.

[131] I will start with some brief comments, because I am sure that you have had a chance to get into the evidence already. I will focus on some of the main points that come through the report and start with local authority education inspections and what we are finding from those. School reorganisation is inspected as part of a theme called 'access and school places' in local authority inspections earlier in the cycle. It was not done in every inspection, but it is now.

[132] Overall we have inspected seven local authorities in the present cycle and the grades for access in that area and that aspect of local authority provision are the weakest of any of the aspects of provision that we have looked at in local authority inspections. Effectively, too many local authorities have not taken robust action in order to reorganise and address the issues around that. The key shortcoming is that many local authorities do not have a long-term strategy that links the reduction of surplus places with improvements in school buildings and school estate. This means that too many pupils are receiving education in poor quality buildings that are not fit for purpose and are in a poor state of repair and we see too much of the resource that is available for school repair going into ad-hoc short-term repairs without thought being given to the bigger, complete picture of how the whole school estate in an area needs to be reorganised.

[133] In my last annual report—my first one that came out in February—we noted that local authorities serving rural areas had been slow to tackle the issue of surplus place schools and unfilled places and that that was exacerbated for them by the fact that they are maintaining a large number of small schools that are expensive to run.

[134] If we now turn to the remit work that we have done in this area, one or two arguments against that may be around the issue of quality. We looked specifically at the evaluation of schools before and after moving into new buildings or significantly refurbished premises, in effect, testing the assumption of whether provision would be better or worse after moving into refurbished buildings, and we found significant evidence that things do improve. In all schools, better buildings contribute to improving a range of outcomes, including achievement, behaviour, attendance and teaching. Most new school buildings offer pupils more choices because they have more space and better facilities; before and after school activities are improved as a result of new school buildings, generally speaking. So, overall we see significant benefits for pupils who are brought into merged and improved school accommodation often as a result of rationalisation.

[135] One common concern is around class-size issues. There is perhaps a concern that that will lead to children being taught in bigger classes and that that will be detrimental to their education. However, we have done a remit report on the impact of class sizes in primary schools.

10.30 a.m.

[136] We noted in that report that there is no clear link between class size and pupil attainment across the piece in primary schools; there is very ambivalent evidence on that point, and there is certainly no clear link. In many cases, teaching 25 to 30 pupils who are of a very similar age can be much easier than teaching a group of 15 to 20 pupils of mixed ages. It is extremely difficult to meet the learning needs of a very wide age range of pupils in some of the composite classes that you find. Having a small number of teachers in a school increases some aspects of teacher workload, and there are social consequences in the sense of small schools limiting the range of sporting, social and cultural interaction. At the simplest level, activities involving group or team playing are less possible in small schools.

[137] Taking a broad view of quality, quality in schools is, by and large, a function of the quality of leadership, management and teaching. Again, we do not find from our inspections that size is a significant factor in determining that—the quality of leadership and teaching is far more important than the size of a school. Indeed, small schools, generally, face greater pressures in areas of leadership and management, staff development and curriculum planning; all of these things are shared among a much smaller number of staff, and headteachers also have a full-time class commitment in smaller schools. The same is true of small secondary schools, where senior management may also have heavy teaching loads and far fewer

resources in terms of middle management to support them.

[138] If a large school has a high proportion of weak teachers, the standards will not be as high as they are in a small school with good teachers. However, if one teacher in a small school is weak, that has a very strong, disproportionate impact on the careers of pupils going through that school, because pupils will, necessarily, spend a very high proportion of their time with that weak teacher.

[139] So, in our view, there is no evidence that small schools have better outcomes than large schools. There is no evidence either that, when small schools close and children transfer to larger, merged schools, standards decline, or that standards specifically in Welsh decline; we have also heard the argument that keeping a small school alive purely as a bastion of the Welsh language in that area is important. However, as pupils transfer from such schools into larger schools, we have seen no evidence of such a decline.

[140] Indeed, when we look at schools that we have in special measures or in significant concern categories, we find that there is a disproportionate presence of small schools. There are six primary schools in special measures at the moment, and five of these are small schools with fewer than 90 pupils. Five out of the 12 primary schools in the significant concern category—which is a notch up from that, but it is still very worrying—are also small schools. So, that is a disproportionate level, albeit the numbers are small.

[141] **Alun Davies:** Thank you, Dr Maxwell. You caught the end of our previous session with the National Association of Small Schools. Its main evidence was that small schools provide better outcomes, and the witness provided us with examples from Scotland and other places that, where education is provided through a small primary school, the outcomes are better and the impact on those pupils endures throughout the rest of their educational experience. Do you have any evidence to sustain that argument?

[142] **Dr Maxwell:** No, our evidence does not sustain that argument. It is a very complex argument to sustain; research is conclusive in that area. My experience is that there are many types of factors to do with the socioeconomic status of parents and children in schools that are mixed in with the geography and size of school, and it is all very difficult to unravel. However, from our reading of the evidence, and from our practical experience of inspecting, we do not find that to be the case. Ann, do you want to comment further?

[143] **Ms Keane:** I have brought along a copy of our headlines document from this year's annual report—I will leave this document with the committee—and the table on page 6 indicates, for each local authority, the spread of grades from schools inspected in the previous year. On page 8, there is school inspection data over two years, representing, overall, a third of the schools of Wales. In the list that we have provided to you, we have listed the rural areas of Wales, and you will see that there is not a match between the best authorities, according to the collation of inspection data on outcomes, and the rural authorities. Indeed, in terms of rank order, they tend to be the local authorities of Newport, Torfaen, Bridgend, Wrexham, Blaenau Gwent, although Gwynedd comes fairly high on the list. These grades are based on our inspection reports. The inspection report methodology is based on a contextualisation of the outcomes for those schools in terms of factors such as deprivation and the starting points of pupils in those schools, and the distance travelled—in other words, the value added by those schools. That is basic to the Estyn methodology. We use free school meal indicators to judge how well schools are doing in terms of outcomes.

[144] **Alun Ffred Jones:** Pwynt Mr Benford oedd bod canlyniadau addysgiadol yn llawer gwell mewn ysgolion bach—ysgolion gwledig ar y cyfan—nag mewn ysgolion **Alun Ffred Jones:** Mr Benford's point was that educational attainment was far better in small schools—rural schools, on the whole—than in other schools. Is that statement



eraill. A yw'r gosodiad hwnnw'n gywir, hyd yn oed ar lefel arwynebol iawn?

[145] **Ms Keane:** Nid yn ôl y dystiolaeth sydd gan Estyn. Mae dau ffactor pwysig sy'n effeithio ar gyrhaeddiad a chyflawniad plant. Un yw ansawdd yr addysgu, a'r llall yw cefndir y plant; hynny yw, a yw'r plant yn dod o ardaloedd neu ddalgylchoedd breintiedig ai peidio. Felly, mae'r ffactorau hynny'n torri ar draws trafodaethau ynglŷn â maint yr ysgolion. Ond, at ei gilydd, os edrychwch ar y canlyniadau—mae graddau Estyn yn rhoi ystyriaeth i'r canlyniadau—yr ydym yn eu gosod yng nghyd-destun gwerth am arian a chyflawniad y plant.

[146] **Mr A. Thomas:** Ategfaf y pwynt hwnnw. Mae'n osodiad ysgubol i ddweud bod ysgolion bach yn eu cyfanrwydd yn gwneud yn well, oherwydd, fel yr ydym wedi'i ddangos yn ein papur, mae amrywiaeth eang o fewn ysgolion bach ac o fewn ysgolion mawr. Ond, mae effaith—yr ydym wedi dangos hyn yn barod—dau athro da ar garfan o ddisgyblion yn gallu bod yn gadarnhaol iawn, ac mae effaith dau athro cymedrol yn gallu bod yn andwyol iawn. Felly, mae amrywiaeth eang o fewn ysgolion.

[147] Mae gennym ysgolion bach arbennig o dda yng Nghymru—ni fyddai neb yn dadlau â hynny. Fodd bynnag, mae'n tystiolaeth yn dangos bod yr ysgolion sy'n syrthio i'r categori hwn yn ysgolion lle mae newid yn gallu digwydd dros nos, fel newid aelod o staff. Os yw aelod effeithiol o staff yn gadael ac aelod llai effeithiol yn cymryd ei le, gellir gweld dirywiad; yn yr un modd, gellir gweld gwelliant yn sydyn iawn hefyd. Mae'r gair *volatile* yn addas iawn i ddisgrifio natur rhai o'r ysgolion hyn.

[148] **Michael German:** I will rewind the clock a bit, because this committee's inquiry was based on a petition that the Assembly received from communities in Powys. When they gave evidence to another committee here, the petitioners said that the authority in Powys had stated that the driving force for its problem was Estyn—that Estyn had directed it to reorganise its small schools. We have already heard today, from the Welsh Local Government Association that the Welsh Assembly Government, Estyn and the Wales Audit Office all share a common thread and that they tend to pick up from each other the direction of travel. Will you, first, comment on how you have influenced Powys local authority, and whether or not the level of influence ascribed to you was greater or less than what we have been told?

10.40 a.m.

correct, even on a very superficial level?

**Ms Keane:** Not according to the evidence that Estyn has. There are two important factors that influence pupils' attainment and achievement. One is the quality of teaching, and the other is the background of the pupils; that is, whether or not the pupils come from advantaged areas or catchment areas. Therefore, those factors cut across the discussions on school size. However, in general, if you look at results—Estyn's grades take account of the results—we set those results in the context of value for money and pupil attainment.

**Mr A. Thomas:** I endorse that point. It is a sweeping statement to say that all small schools do better, because, as we have shown in our paper, there is huge variation within small schools and within large schools. However, as we have already highlighted, the influence of two good teachers on a cohort of pupils can be very positive, and the impact of two average teachers can be very detrimental. Therefore, there is huge variation within schools.

We have some excellent small schools in Wales—no-one would argue with that. However, our evidence shows that schools that fall into this category are schools where change can occur overnight, such as staff changes. If an effective member of staff is replaced with a less effective staff member, there can be deterioration; in the same way, improvements can also happen very suddenly. The word 'volatile' is very appropriate to describe the nature of some of these schools.

[149] Secondly, on this whole notion of dealing with surplus places, small schools, and the impact on surplus places, how much are you driven by what the Welsh Assembly Government has done? You have mentioned remit letters several times this morning. How much is this driven by the Welsh Assembly Government and how much do you think that you and the audit office are on a similar policy track on this? Are you able to declare the independence that Her Majesty requires of you?

[150] **Mr A. Thomas:** I will pick up on the Powys point first, as I was part of that inspection team. Simply, for a number of years, Powys has been trying to grapple with the issues of a large number of rural schools, a diminishing population and increasing inefficiency in its systems. Powys is one of the authorities that have worked out, in quite some detail, how much that is costing on an annual basis. We can leave these calculations with you—they are Powys's calculations that were presented to the board in 2006. They suggest that, on an annual basis, primary surplus places are costing over £4 million and that secondary surplus places are costing over £1 million. There is a cyclical regeneration argument and issues about the best use of public money in local government were one side of the argument.

[151] In our inspection, we could see very clearly that making best use of money was a challenge for the council. The rurality of Powys is one issue and the quality of school buildings is another. Powys schools require significant investment to get them up to what we would call fit for purpose, in this day and age. The way in which we have influenced the situation, if that is the correct term, is to give a view of the distance travelled with regard to addressing surplus school places or unfilled school places. The distance travelled has been minimal, which we were critical of. Powys has been to the drawing board a few times and has been sent back to the drawing board a few times, and there has not been a local decision on the way forward. So, one of our recommendations was the need to come up with a strategy to address this issue, to improve the quality of buildings and to make better use of resources. That is the impartial view that we had on Powys.

[152] **Dr Maxwell:** As a general issue, I can certainly reassure you with regard to our independent voice in this area. Indeed, to some extent, I think that the implications of our comments are perhaps quite critical of the Welsh Assembly Government; there is a requirement for it to take a stronger line in insisting that local authorities develop effective school estate strategies and that those are followed through. Sometimes there is a lack of political will at a local level that results in good plans not coming to fruition. As chief inspector, one of the things that I am charged to look at is value for money in terms of the education system overall. Within an inevitably limited pot of resources, we are always going to be looking closely, particularly in our local authority inspections, at how effectively the overall resources are used. Even if you could prove that very small schools were more effective, which, as we say, we do not have evidence for, if you bear in mind the opportunity cost of running those schools and that the money that they use up could be spread out more effectively to everybody else, there would still be an issue for us in value-for-money terms.

[153] **Michael German:** I would typify it by saying that it is more a case of you driving the agenda for the Welsh Assembly Government in terms of value for money, than the Welsh Assembly Government telling you that this is a remit that it wants you to execute or that this is one of the ways in which it wants you to deal with it.

[154] **Dr Maxwell:** It is an area, I guess, in which the Minister has indicated to us that the Welsh Assembly Government is interested in having good evidence available to inform its policy making—hence the range of remit reports that we have undertaken. We then give our advice on the back of that—without fear or favour, as they say—and it does have implications for the Welsh Assembly Government, I think.

[155] **Michael German:** What I think has come out from what you have said so far is that

the issue of the closure of small or rural schools is more about value for money than the quality of the education. In fact, for your 2006 report on small primary schools in Wales, the headline of the press release was, 'Small Primary Schools in Wales achieve good results'. That is a bold statement, but you have said it, and so you are responsible for it if they achieve the results. So, is it primarily value for money that is driving this agenda? Given that the second year of an increase in birth rates has been announced, if that increasing trend continues—and there is the suggestion of a trend beginning—do you think that you will have to revise your value-for-money objectives if more children will be around in a few years' time?

[156] **Dr Maxwell:** Demographics are always notoriously difficult to predict, but we have to plan on the basis of the best projections that are available, which still show a significant decline in pupil numbers. If that were to change, the calculation might have to change.

[157] **Michael German:** I am sorry to interrupt, but the First Minister assured me in an answer to a question in Plenary that the birth rate has increased for the second year running. They will not become pupils for some years to come, but there is an increasing birth rate. The First Minister does not usually give evidence without getting it from somewhere.

[158] **Dr Maxwell:** The birth rate may well be increasing, but the calculations of the Office for National Statistics are the best bet for long-term projections of the number of school-aged pupils. However, there are already a large number of surplus places in the system, even allowing for that increasing birth rate. With the projection of a declining school population, there is a clear context for a significant degree of rationalisation being necessary. If projections change in a few years' time, the amount might be adjusted to some extent. Alongside that, there is also a significant need to improve the quality of school buildings, which goes hand in hand with the rationalisation of places, and making the best use of the resources that are available in that process, and getting value for money.

[159] **Alun Ffred Jones:** Ar gorn yr hyn ddywedodd Mike German, pan fydd ad-drefnu yn cael ei drafod, un peth a ddyfynnir o hyd yw adroddiadau Estyn ar ysgolion unigol. At ei gilydd, mae'r adroddiadau hynny ar ysgolion bach neu fach iawn yn ffafriol neu yn weddol ffafriol, ac mae rhieni yn dyfynnu'r rheiny fel prawf o'r ffaith bod ysgol yn llwyddo. Fodd bynnag, mae adroddiad Estyn i'r awdurdod addysg lleol yn feirniadol nad yw'r awdurdod wedi cael gwared ar ysgolion bach, neu'r hyn yr ydych yn ei alw yn 'leoedd gweigion', ond, mewn gwirionedd, cau ysgolion yw cael gwared ar leoedd gweigion, ac yr ydym oll yn deall hynny. Felly, sut allwch gysoni'r ddau beth?

**Alun Ffred Jones:** On the back of what Mike German said, when reorganisation is discussed, one thing that is always quoted is Estyn reports on individual schools. On the whole, those reports on small schools or very small schools are favourable, or are reasonably favourable, and parents often quote them as proof of the fact that a school is succeeding. However, the Estyn report to the local education authority is critical that the authority is not getting rid of small schools, or what you call 'surplus places', although, in reality, that just means closing schools, and we all understand that. Therefore, how do you reconcile those two aspects?

[160] **Ms Keane:** Pan ydym yn arolygu ysgolion unigol, nid ydym yn cymharu'r cyllid sy'n dod i'r ysgol honno yn nhermau costau uned y disgyblion gydag ysgolion eraill. Yr ydym yn edrych ar werth am arian o ran y defnydd y mae'r ysgol honno'n ei wneud o'r cyllid y mae'n ei gael. Gyda llaw, wrth ddweud bod ysgolion bach yn dda, gellid dweud bod y mwyafrif o ysgolion

**Ms Keane:** When we inspect individual schools, we do not compare the money that comes to that school in relation to the unit cost per pupil as compared with other schools. We look at value for money in how well that school has made use of the money at its disposal. By the way, in stating that small schools are good, we could say that most schools in Wales are good schools,

Cymru yn ysgolion da, ac felly nid yw hynny'n dweud bod ysgolion bach yn well nac yn waeth na thrwch yr ysgolion eraill. Fodd bynnag, dyna sut ydym yn ystyried effeithlonrwydd ysgolion unigol.

therefore that is not to say that small schools are any better or worse than most of the other schools. However, that is how we look at the efficiency of individual schools.

[161] O ystyried yr ysgolion yr ydym yn eu harolygu mewn blwyddyn, gallwn ddweud bod tua traean o ysgolion cynradd ac un o bob pump o ysgolion uwchradd ag adeiladau anfoddfaol. Dyna pryd y mae'n gymwys inni arolygu awdurdodau addysg, i edrych ar y patrwm cyfan. Mae hynny'n codi cwestiynau o ran sut mae awdurdod yn blaenoriaethu gwariant ar gynnal ysgolion bychain neu ysgolion sydd mewn cyflwr gwael, ac yn peidio â gwneud y defnydd gorau o'r arian i wella'r ddarpariaeth ar gyfer y mwyafrif o blant.

From looking at the schools that we inspect in a year, we would say that around a third of primary schools and one in five secondary schools have buildings that are unsatisfactory. That is where local authority inspections come in, so that we can look at the bigger picture. That raises questions about how an authority prioritises its expenditure on maintaining small schools or schools that are in a poor condition, and is not able to make the best use of the money at its disposal to improve education provision for the majority of children.

[162] **Mr A. Thomas:** Mae'n gwestiwn dilys, achos mae'n mesur dau beth gwahanol, sef defnydd yr ysgol unigol o'r gyllideb sydd ganddi a hefyd sut mae'r cyngor yn defnyddio'i gyllideb er y gorau. Mae dwy neges wahanol yn codi o dro i dro o edrych ar ddarlun yr awdurdod a darlun yr ysgolion unigol.

**Mr A. Thomas:** It is a valid question, because it measures two different things, namely an individual school's use of its budget and also how the council best uses its budget. Two different messages can emerge from looking at the picture of an authority and the picture of an individual school.

10.50 a.m.

[163] **Alun Ffred Jones:** Yr unig beth yr wyf yn ei ddweud yw ei bod hi'n anodd iawn i rieni ddod i benderfyniad, sydd efallai'n ceisio ymdopi â'r syniad o ad-drefnu a chau ysgolion. Rhaid eu bod yn meddwl bod Estyn yn siarad â dau lais. Deallaf eich dadl yn iawn, ond nid yw'r rhieni. Maent yn dweud 'Edrychwch ar yr adroddiad—mae'r ysgol yn dda, felly pam ydych am ei chau?'. Fodd bynnag, mae'r awdurdod a'r cynghorwyr yn clywed neges sy'n ymddangos yn hollol wahanol. Dyma gyfyng-gyngor sy'n cael ei chreu gan natur yr adroddiadau.

**Alun Ffred Jones:** All that I am saying is that it is very difficult for parents to come to a decision, when they may be trying to cope with the idea of reorganisation and school closures. They must think that Estyn is speaking with a forked tongue. I understand your argument, but parents do not; they are saying 'Look at the report—the school is good, so why would you want to close it?'. However, the authority and the councillors are hearing what appears to be a completely different message. It is a dilemma that is created by the nature of these reports.

[164] **Mr A. Thomas:** Yr ail bwynt y byddwn yn ei ychwanegu at yr ateb am yr awdurdodau yw'r defnydd a wneir o asedau a sut mae cynnal a chadw yn digwydd. Yr ydym wedi gweld yn glir bod yr hinsawdd addysgu, fel pob peth arall, yn well i athrawon ac i ddisgyblion pan fyddant mewn adeiladau cyfoes a newydd, ac mae'n haws o ran yr arweinyddiaeth ac ati o fewn yr ysgol. Mae gennym ormod o adeiladau yng

**Mr A. Thomas:** The second point that I would add to the answer about authorities is the use that is made of assets and how maintenance is carried out. We have seen clearly that, when pupils are educated in new, modern buildings, it creates a far better climate of learning, as with everything else, for teachers and for pupils, and it is easier for the leadership in the school and so on. We have too many buildings in Wales that were

Nghymru a oedd yn addas ar ddiwedd oes Fictoria a dechrau'r ganrif ddiwethaf, ond nid ydynt yn addas ar gyfer yr addysg y mae arnom ei heisiau ar gyfer plant yn yr unfed ganrif ar hugain. Mae honno hefyd yn her i'r awdurdodau.

fit for purpose for the end of the Victorian age and the start of the last century, but they are not suitable for the education that we want to deliver for our children in the twenty-first century. That is also a challenge for authorities.

[165] **Alun Ffred Jones:** Fodd bynnag, fe glywsoch y prifathro yn dweud ei fod yn hapus i ddysgu gyda dŵr yn llifo drwy'r to, oherwydd nid adeiladau sy'n gwneud ysgol.

**Alun Ffred Jones:** However, you heard the headteacher saying that he would be happy to teach with water pouring through the roof, as it is not a building that makes a school.

[166] **Mr A. Thomas:** Pe na bai'n gorfod cadw ei fys yn y twll yn y to, gallai roi arweiniad addysgol cliriach i'r ysgol.

**Mr A. Thomas:** If he did not have to keep his finger in the hole in the roof, he could offer clearer educational leadership to the school.

[167] **Ms Keane:** Deuaf yn ôl at ansawdd yr athrawon a'r addysgu, sef y ffactor bwysicaf. Gall fod athrawon da mewn ysgolion bychain gymaint â mewn ysgolion mwy, a dyna'r ffactor bwysicaf o ran ansawdd yr addysg i'r disgyblion.

**Ms Keane:** I return to the quality of the teachers and the education, which is the most important factor. You can have good teachers in small schools just as you can in larger schools, and that is the most important factor to the quality of education for the pupils.

[168] **Michael German:** I will just pick up on one of the points that Mr Thomas made earlier, which comes on the back of the question that Alun Ffred just cheekily put to you about quality. We were told by the Welsh Local Government Association this morning that the words 'fit for purpose', which is what you just said, have not been adequately described, and there is no adequate guidance from the Welsh Assembly Government on what 'fit for purpose' means. Do you agree with that analysis, or is it an analysis that you have done and the Welsh Assembly Government has not picked up on?

[169] **Mr A. Thomas:** The term 'fit for purpose' came from 'A Learning Country', which had a notional target of schools being 'fit for purpose' by 2010. The WLGA is right that there has been a lack of definition of 'fit for purpose' underneath the very broad aim.

[170] **Michael German:** Would you venture a solution?

[171] **Mr A. Thomas:** How long have you got? It is extremely difficult to answer that question, and perhaps the committee might want to ask for further evidence on that. To drill down to the detail of the meaning of 'fit for purpose', you have to unpick issues of school size, quality, budget, leadership, the number of teachers, and a plethora of others, as well as the best resources to deliver quality education.

[172] **Ms Keane:** If you look at the case studies evaluating schools' performance before and after moving into new buildings, you will find what we regard to be the features of a fit-for-purpose building.

[173] **Lorraine Barrett:** Some of the results on the improvement in attainment after moving from an old school to a new school building were amazing. It was quite startling.

[174] Looking at schools working together, do you have any examples of how small rural schools are working together? Do you think, generally, that schools in Wales are exploiting these opportunities effectively, and do you think that they are encouraged or given sufficient guidance on how they might work together?

[175] **Dr Maxwell:** Arwyn, I think that you did the small primary schools work.

[176] **Mr A. Thomas:** How much guidance they are given is difficult to answer. There are examples of some good, innovative practice. I think that we mentioned those case studies in which we tried to use information communication technology to videoconference lessons from one school to another to get a broader curriculum and teaching expertise influencing teachers. That is one example.

[177] A federation of schools in which the numbers are large enough to allow the headteacher to be non-teaching has to be a key driver. If you can get a federated school where the headteacher is non-teaching, you get leadership and direction at a higher level. If the headteacher is still teaching, the situation becomes even more complicated and that would be another issue. In some rural areas, usually because of local circumstances, such as when the headteacher has been off sick, we have seen a headteacher from a neighbouring large school used, and that has had a significant impact in some places. There is a peer influence on teachers as well, as teachers can learn from one another. Small schools can be isolated and some teachers can be pretty lonely and, by the luck of the draw, you might not always get on with the person whom you are working with, and that happens in some places. That marriage, with the head of a larger school having an overview of one, two or even three schools, has a positive spin-off, because you then have professional development for teachers in the small schools, and they can go to see what is happening in the larger institution as well. So, there are opportunities there.

[178] In some areas, independent small schools work effectively in clusters, where the heads work together effectively. They come together for training and for meetings after school on specific issues. They might discuss a subject area that they want to develop and then one member from one school will lead on that area, which gives them the opportunity to manage people, which is extremely difficult in a very small school scenario. If you have just the headteacher and yourself at a school, it is very difficult to manage the headteacher if you are a junior member of staff. The opportunity to manage on a broader basis and to manage colleagues of a similar status to you is a good opportunity for professional development. So, there are examples out there. On whether such examples are strategic and planned well enough, one would say that quite a few of them have been victims of circumstance. The solution has been the right solution at that point in time.

[179] **Lorraine Barrett:** Could you say something about isolated schools? You say in your paper that they face the greatest number of challenges and are vulnerable. I am not sure what you mean by 'vulnerable', and so I just wondered whether you could expand on that a bit.

[180] **Mr A. Thomas:** It comes back again to the very micro schools that have just two teachers. We also have the one-teacher scenario in some places in Wales. If they do not work together as in some of the examples that we described earlier, the world can pass them by and they can be professionally isolated. As a result, the pupils' experience may not be as broad as it should be if they are not working with other schools to provide opportunities for pupils to work in teams. We have the eisteddfod culture in Wales, but it is very difficult to get a group or party together if you have only two or three pupils of the same age group. So, that kind of isolation minimises the pupils' opportunities. The other element of vulnerability is that, unless you have a robust local authority that often sends someone into the schools to challenge practice, schools can be left alone to get on with it and things might not be as they seem. There are examples of such schools and that is why we have such a disproportionate amount of smaller schools in those categories.

[181] **Lorraine Barrett:** On professional development, when there are only one, two or three teachers in a school, what sort of general support do they get from the local education

authorities? I am thinking of things like INSET days. Do they have INSET days in clusters, too, so that they can all share and learn?

[182] **Mr A. Thomas:** There are such examples. The best local authorities undertake a minimum number of visits to a school per year—usually two or three. If a school is facing difficulties and it has identified why it is in that situation, the authority will give it extra support. That happens in the best authorities, but it does not happen everywhere across Wales, which increases the school's vulnerability.

11.00 a.m.

[183] Regarding INSET, the training budget for a very small school is minimal, so maximising the impact of that involves pooling it together in a cluster. In some areas, clusters are also working in conjunction with secondary schools on transition plans, making the best use of secondary expertise to influence primary practice, and primary expertise in some areas, and vice versa. There is a collegiality in some areas between all teachers rather than just between primary teachers and between secondary teachers. You could argue that small secondary schools, with single teachers leading departments, are equally vulnerable in some areas.

[184] **Lorraine Barrett:** I have one last question. In our report, do you think that it will be just as important to concentrate on the impact or effect on teachers? We have concentrated on the educational aspect for children, and rightly so, but have we failed to cover the impact on teachers in this whole scenario. Should we look at that?

[185] **Mr A. Thomas:** The big challenge that will face small schools in the future will be getting headteachers, because not enough headteachers are coming through with the National Professional Qualification for Headship, and teachers in small and very small schools have great difficulty in demonstrating that they meet the criteria to get onto the course in the first place, because of their limited managerial experience in their schools. If they work on a cluster level, they get opportunities to work on that level. So, you are right to point out that this is a key area. If there is not a radical change in the structure of schools in Wales in the near future, this will be a key area and a challenge, and alternative methods for leading schools will have to be looked at.

[186] **Ms Keane:** While the federation of small schools does not solve the issue of buildings or those problems, it gives a lot of advantages in terms of economies of scale, management, context for professional development, and the kind of joint planning and assessment that can happen more effectively.

[187] **Alun Ffred Jones:** A ydych chi am ofyn cwestiwn am y Gymraeg, Gadeirydd? **Alun Ffred Jones:** Do you want to ask a question about the Welsh the language, Chair?

[188] **Alun Davies:** Nid oeddwn yn bwriadu gwneud. **Alun Davies:** I did not intend to do so.

[189] **Alun Ffred Jones:** Iawn. Cyffyrddaf ag un mater. Yr ydych wedi rhoi dadleuon ger ein bron ynglŷn â pham fod heriau, fel yr ydych yn ei ddweud, yn wynebu ysgolion bach o safbwynt datblygu proffesiynol ac addysgu. Fodd bynnag, ymddengys i mi, yw bod rhieni, ar y cyfan, yn hoffi ysgolion bach, ac mae'r athrawon sydd yn dysgu mewn **Alun Ffred Jones:** Right. I will touch on one issue. You have presented us with arguments about how small schools face challenges, as you put it, in terms of professional development and teaching. However, it seems to me that, on the whole, parents like small schools, and the teachers who teach in small schools have voiced their support for

ysgolion bach wedi bod yn llafar iawn o blaid y drefn honno. Felly, pam fod eich tystiolaeth chi'n gwbl wahanol i brofiadau pobl ar lawr gwlad?

[190] **Mr A. Thomas:** Ni ddywedwn ei fod yn gwbl wahanol, oherwydd mai'r hyn yr ydym yn ei ddweud yw nad oes gwahaniaeth o ran maint ysgol o ran ansawdd deilliannau ar gyfer disgyblion ond bod heriau. Mae'n bosibl iawn bod athrawon yn gyfforddus ac yn hapus mewn ysgolion bach, ond nid yw hynny'n golygu bod eu gwaith yn effeithiol. I ddychwelyd at y pwynt a gododd Lorraine, maent yn gallu bod yn fregus ac yn broffesiynol unig o fewn eu hysgolion. Efallai fod carfan yn eu plith nad yw'n dymuno gweld newid am nifer o wahanol resymau, ond y pwynt yr ydym ni'n ei wneud yw ei fod yn bwysig bod llwybr proffesiynol clir i bob aelod o staff ym mhob ysgol, beth bynnag ei maint, a bod pob disgybl, beth bynnag yw ei llwybr ef neu ei llwybr hi, yn yr ysgol leiaf i'r mwyaf, yn cael y cyfleodd gorau. Y pwynt yr ydym ni wedi ei wneud drwy'r bore yw bod maint yn ffactor fawr sydd yn cyfrannu at ba mor fregus y gall rhai o'r ysgolion fod.

[191] **Alun Ffred Jones:** Yr ydych yn cyfeirio yn eich tystiolaeth at brofiadau yn sir Benfro, lle yr ydych yn teimlo bod yr ad-drefnu wedi'i wneud yn fwyaf effeithiol. Mae gennyf ddau gwestiwn. A yw canlyniadau addysgol sir Benfro yn profi y bu hynny'n llwyddiant neu fel arall, neu a yw'n rhy gynnar i ddweud? Yn ail, pa wersi sydd i'w dysgu o'r ffordd mae wedi mynd ati?

[192] **Ms Keane:** Mae'r tablau yn dangos bod sir Benfro yn cyflawni'n dda yn nhermau y graddau y mae Estyn yn eu rhoi iddi yn yr adroddiadau ar yr ysgolion.

[193] Byddwn i yn gofyn i'r athrawon ac i'r rhieni sy'n dweud y byddai'n well ganddynt aros gyda sefyllfa o ysgolion bach a ydynt yn dadlau o ran y *status quo*, hynny yw a ydynt yn dadlau i gadw'r hyn y maent yn gyfarwydd ag ef. A ydynt wedi cael profiad o ysgol fach ac ysgol fwy sydd, efallai, â gwell cyfleusterau?

[194] **Mr A. Thomas:** O'r ysgolion y

that system. Therefore, why is your evidence completely different to the experience of people on the ground?

**Mr A. Thomas:** I would not say that it is completely different, because what we are saying is that the size of a school does not have an impact on the quality of the outcomes for pupils but that there are challenges. It is very possible that teachers are comfortable and happy in small schools, but that does not mean that they are working effectively. To return to the point raised by Lorraine, they can be vulnerable and professionally isolated within their schools. There may be parties among them who do not wish to see change for a number of reasons, but the point that we are making is that it is important that there is a clear professional pathway for every member of staff in every school, whatever its size, and that every pupil, whatever his or her educational pathway, in the smallest school to the largest, is given the best opportunities possible. The point that we have been making throughout the morning is that size is a significant factor that contributes to how vulnerable some of the schools can be.

**Alun Ffred Jones:** In your evidence, you referred to experiences in Pembrokeshire, where you feel that the reorganisation has been carried out most effectively. I have two questions. Do Pembrokeshire's educational outcomes prove that that was a success or otherwise, or is it too early to tell? Secondly, what lessons can be learned from the way in which it has gone about it?

**Ms Keane:** The tables show that Pembrokeshire is achieving well in terms of Estyn grades in the school inspection reports.

I would ask teachers and parents who say that they would prefer to maintain the situation whereby there are small schools whether they are just arguing from the point of view of the status quo, to keep what they know. Have they had an experience with a small school and with a larger school that, perhaps, has better facilities?

**Mr A. Thomas:** Of the schools in Wales that



byddech yn cydnabod yng Nghymru yn rhai traddodiadol wledig, y rheiny yn sir Benfro sy'n perfformio orau.

you would recognise as being traditionally rural, those in Pembrokeshire are the best performing.

[195] **Ms Keane:** O'r holl awdurdodau gwledig, sir Benfro sydd yn perfformio orau. Mae Ceredigion yn agos ati, ac mae Conwy hefyd yn gwneud yn dda.

**Ms Keane:** Of the rural authorities, Pembrokeshire is the best performing. Ceredigion is close behind, and Conwy is also doing well.

[196] **Mr A. Thomas:** Y brif wers i'w dysgu oddi wrth sir Benfro yw'r modd y mae wedi mynd ati i gyfleu'r darlun bod yr adrefnu y mae wedi'i wneud yn dod â budd, nid yn unig i'r disgyblion, ond hefyd i'r athrawon ac i'r proffesiwn yn ei gyfanrwydd. Mae gan sir Benfro ddull o ddangos i rieni y gall gynnig darpariaeth well na'r hyn sydd eisoes ar gael iddynt. Un o'r ffactorau yn llwyddiant sir Benfro yw'r ffaith ei bod wedi gwneud newidiadau yn y gorffennol. Mae'n anoddach o lawer i awdurdodau sydd heb enghreifftiau i ddangos sut fyddai'r newid yn debygol o edrych. Mae gan sir Benfro nifer o enghreifftiau erbyn hyn a gall ddweud, 'Oherwydd inni wneud hyn, mae hyn a hyn yn digwydd, sy'n cael ei brofi yn ein canlyniadau'.

**Mr A. Thomas:** The main lesson that can be learned from Pembrokeshire is the way in which it has conveyed the bigger picture—that the reorganisation that it has carried out has brought benefits, not only to pupils, but also to teachers and to the profession as a whole. Pembrokeshire has a way of showing parents that it can offer them provision that is better than that which they have. One of the factors in Pembrokeshire's success is that it has undertaken change in the past. It is far more difficult for authorities that do not have examples to show what the change is likely to look like. Pembrokeshire now has many examples and can say, 'Because we have done this, this and this has been achieved, and that is shown in our results'.

[197] **Alun Davies:** Diolch am gymryd yr amser i ddod i ateb ein cwestiynau a hefyd am baratoi'r dystiolaeth ysgrifenedig—yr ydym yn ei werthfawrogi. Byddwch yn derbyn copi o drawsgrifiad y sesiwn.

**Alun Davies:** Thank you for taking the time this morning to come to answer our questions and for preparing your written evidence—we appreciate it. You will receive a transcript of the session.

[198] Yr wyf am gau'r cyfarfod yn awr; bydd y cyfarfod nesaf ddydd Mercher nesaf, pan fyddwn yn croesholi'r Gweinidog.

I now close the meeting; the next meeting will be held next Wednesday, when we will be questioning the Minister.

*Daeth y cyfarfod i ben am 11.07 p.m.  
The meeting ended at 11.07 p.m.*