



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

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

**Dydd Mercher, 9 Gorffennaf 2008
Wednesday, 9 July 2008**

Cynnwys
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Inquiry into Education Provision and School Reorganisation in Rural Wales: Evidence
Session

Cofnodir y trafodion hyn yn yr iaith y llefarwyd hwy ynddi yn y pwyllgor. Yn ogystal,
cynhwysir cyfieithiad Saesneg o gyfraniadau yn y Gymraeg.

These proceedings are reported in the language in which they were spoken in the committee.
In addition, an English translation of Welsh speeches is included.

Aelodau'r pwyllgor yn bresennol
Committee members in attendance

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

Eraill yn bresennol
Others in attendance

Mary Davies	Yr Adran Plant, Addysg, Dysgu Gydol Oes a Sgiliau, Llywodraeth Cynulliad Cymru Department for Children, Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills, Welsh Assembly Government
Jane Hutt	Aelod Cynulliad, Llafur (Y Gweinidog dros Blant, Addysg, Dysgu Gydol Oes a Sgiliau) Assembly Member, Labour (The Minister for Children, Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills)
Paul Williams	Yr Adran Plant, Addysg, Dysgu Gydol Oes a Sgiliau, Llywodraeth Cynulliad Cymru Department for Children, Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills, Welsh Assembly Government

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 11.31 a.m.
The meeting began at 11.31 a.m.

Cyflwyniad, Ymddiheuriadau a Dirprwyon
Introduction, Apologies and Substitutions

[1] **Alun Davies:** Galwaf y cyfarfod i **Alun Davies:** I call the meeting to order.
drefn.

[2] Yr ydym wedi derbyn We have received apologies from Mick Bates
ymddiheuriadau gan Mick Bates ar gyfer y for this meeting, and Mike German is
cyfarfod hwn, ac mae Mike German yn standing in for him.
cymryd ei le.

11.31 a.m.

**Ymchwiliad i Ddarparu Addysg yng Nghefn Gwlad Cymru ac Ad-drefnu
Ysgolion Gwledig: Sesiwn Dystiolaeth
Inquiry into Education Provision and School Reorganisation in Rural Wales:
Evidence Session**

[3] **Alun Davies:** Dyma ein cyfarfod olaf fel rhan o'n harchwiliad i mewn i addysg yn y Gymru wledig, yn arbennig ar ad-drefnu ysgolion. Yr wyf yn ddiolchgar ichi, Weinidog, am ddod o hyd i'r amser i ddod atom y bore yma, a hynny ar fyr rybudd. Yr ydym yn gwerthfawrogi ac yn ddiolchgar am hynny.

Alun Davies: This is our final meeting as part of our investigation into education in rural Wales, and school reorganisation in particular. I am grateful to you, Minister, for finding the time to attend this morning, and at such short notice. We appreciate and are grateful for that.

[4] Deallaf nad oes gennych unrhyw sylwadau cychwynnol.

I understand that you do not have any opening remarks.

[5] **The Minister for Children, Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills (Jane Hutt):** I have a few opening remarks, if that is okay.

[6] **Alun Davies:** Okay, we will go straight to your opening remarks and then to Members' questions.

[7] **Jane Hutt:** Diolch, Alun. I just have a few opening remarks following on from my written evidence. I welcome this inquiry, because we are now, as I am sure that you are aware, reviewing our Assembly circular on school organisation proposals, so it has come at the right time. In fact, Mary Davies, who is sitting next to me, is leading on that review, and we are expecting the revised circular to go out for consultation before the start of the autumn term for a period of three months. So, it will be timely to have your report leading into that consultation, and it has been very useful already, in reading about the exchanges and meetings and the evidence that you have received.

[8] I want to make a point about the two roles that I have to play on behalf of the Welsh Assembly Government as Minister. The first role is about providing a framework to enable local authorities to reorganise their schools when they identify the need to do so, and to provide guidance on the approach that they should normally take. It is crucial, in terms of the framework, that all interests—all stakeholders and partners—are able to participate in the process. We must identify current Government policy directions, aspirations and expectations, but not be overly prescriptive, because the second role that I have to play as Minister is to decide on disputed statutory proposals. So, again, it is important to draw attention to those two roles that I have to play in terms of the Assembly Government's role.

[9] We are now looking at guidance and policy developments since 2002, which was when we initiated the current circular, and also to remind authorities that they must engage fully in looking at how effectively they are organising their schools, and I know that the Welsh Local Government Association has recognised that.

[10] I wanted to make the important link, which I am sure that others have made, between ways in which we develop links between the allocation of capital funding for schools and effective strategic planning for local education authorities in terms of planning school places.

I have engaged fully with the Welsh Local Government Association on that at the seminar this year. The key theme of its report, which it took to that seminar and in which all local authorities engaged, and ‘The Learning Country’ signal there, are being taken forward in terms of those links between capital investment and school reorganisation.

[11] I did not focus in my written evidence on points about the opportunities and the options that local authorities have for creating federated schools under the 1998 legislation. You may want to touch on that. I also intend to provide regulations over the next months that offer the option of promoting the federation of governing bodies, which I also wanted to bring to your attention. Finally, I welcome this review and it will inform our policy review on the current guidance.

[12] **Alun Davies:** That is helpful. We hope to report in September, so that will fit into the timescale that you have outlined.

[13] I represent five local authorities across mid, west and north Wales and whenever there is a small school closure or the threat of such a closure, without exception the local authorities have blamed you. They have said that they were forced to do it by the Welsh Assembly Government. Is that a fair analysis?

[14] **Jane Hutt:** It is not a fair analysis and I think that I have made it clear in my written evidence—and it is absolutely clear in the circular—that we are looking to local authorities to consider whether they are providing the most effective education. Since the Assembly came into being, there have only been 31 reorganisation proposals, as my paper states. In fact, 39 per cent of those have been decided locally and 61 per cent by having to engage with the Minister. We want to ensure that we provide the right guidance to local authorities, but they have the responsibility to recognise falling rolls, which is a crucial issue. That is how we make it clear and lay it out.

[15] **Alun Davies:** The local authorities have put to us, and have told me in private and during debates in the Mid and West Wales region, that the policy framework created by the Welsh Assembly Government leaves them with no option but to proactively seek to close small schools.

[16] **Jane Hutt:** I would dispute that. If we go back to the guidance in Wales Circular No. 23/02 on school organisation proposals, we set out the key considerations, which are the pattern of school provision and its effect on the standard of education provided in an area. For school closure proposals, we have to ensure that rationalisation proposals reflect the need to maintain and improve standards. However, the record in itself demonstrates that my role is to lay out the framework, enable LEAs to take their responsibilities and ensure that they are facing up to the economic realities of their education provision. I think that that is clear. So, to a certain extent, I can see why local education authorities—and I have met with the Powys community schools action group—are concerned about the role of the Assembly Government in terms of its advice and guidance and it is crucial that we take responsibility for guiding authorities appropriately, but on falling rolls and provision of effective education, they know that they have to take responsibility.

[17] **Alun Davies:** Thank you for that; that is very clear.

[18] **Alun Ffred Jones:** Ond y gwir yw bod y drafodaeth hon, sydd fel arfer yn troi'n ddadl, yn ymwneud â llefydd gweigion. Clywais y Prif Weinidog a Gweinidogion addysg ac Estyn yn dweud droeon bod llefydd gweigion yn gyrru'r agenda hwn. A **Alun Ffred Jones:** But the truth is that this debate, which usually turns into an argument, is to do with surplus places. I have heard Estyn, the First Minister and education Ministers say on successive occasions that surplus places drive this agenda forward. Is

yw hynny'n deg?

that fair?

11.40 a.m.

[19] **Jane Hutt:** Surplus places are an issue. It goes back to the fact, as I said in answer to Alun's question, that the Welsh Local Government Association recognises that local authorities should understand economic realities and that they need to organise efficiently, and surplus school places come into that. The capacity of a school is the number of pupils that it can accommodate and the most efficient use has to be made of resources available for education. On the financial issues, the Audit Commission recommends that authorities should aim for no more than 10 per cent surplus places overall. That is a reasonable guide, but we are saying that authorities should use their local knowledge and informed projections of pupil numbers to decide what is appropriate for their area—we are not laying down a limit for a maximum or minimum. Surplus places are an issue, and cannot be ignored. I am sure that you will be aware that we have new arrangements for assessing capacity, which authorities have found very useful to give them guidance in assessing what surplus places would mean.

[20] To return to the Audit Commission, it estimates that a surplus primary place potentially costs over £2,000 per year and that surplus secondary places cost nearly £3,000, and that estimate was done 10 years ago. So, there is no doubt about the financial challenge, and the guidance from the Audit Commission has a bearing, but the new assessment arrangements have been useful.

[21] **Brynle Williams:** Good morning, Minister. On surplus places, reference was also made in committee that there is an increase in the birth rate, which we will, hopefully, see in the document coming out on Monday by your colleague Jane Davidson on affordable housing. Are we not going to be in a position where we will have insufficient capacity in certain areas? In a village local to me, we have closed one school, because, regrettably, numbers went down, but another school is oversubscribed. With the increase in birth rate, we will be expanding those school places. Are we catering for that expansion in the birth rate?

[22] **Jane Hutt:** I had anticipated a question about the birth rate. We reached a low point in 2002 in terms of births in Wales, but since then there has been a small but steady annual increase. The latest figures from the Office for National Statistics are for 2006; it has not yet reported for 2007. We have had some indication from health authority figures that there may be an increase emerging, as you said, but we need to wait for the ONS figures to compare like with like. However, I would suggest that it is only a very modest increase, Brynle. We must set this against the decline that took place until that turnaround. As I said in my written evidence, if no action is taken to reduce surplus places, there could be over 100,000 empty school places by 2014, which is more than 20 per cent of the total. So, we must take account of the rise in birth rate, but local authorities will have to look carefully at what is happening in their areas because the increase in the number of births is not evenly spread across Wales, and you can imagine the factors that relate to that. Local authorities will have to take on board, but it does not detract from the overall picture in terms of falling pupil numbers and the empty school places that we know are there, and which will increase.

[23] **Michael German:** To return to Alun's first question about taking the blame, it has been put to us in evidence that there is a joint approach to this issue by the Audit Commission, Estyn and the Welsh Assembly Government, and that you seem to be singing off the same song sheet. Is there any agreement between you as to the policy making, or have the other two bodies fed off your policy in respect of surplus places, because the approach seems to be fairly uniform across the three bodies? If you look at it carefully, you will see that it is a concerted approach by all three bodies to ensure that this is happening.

[24] **Jane Hutt:** Estyn has a particular role to play, and I am sure that you welcomed its

valuable report in terms of the assessment of the issues around small schools and performance and attainment. The Audit Commission is coming from a financial perspective, and I have acknowledged that in my written evidence, so I will not repeat the facts that I have reported already. It has a particular role to play, and I see ours as having a holistic policy approach to guide and support local authorities in addressing these challenges.

[25] It goes back to the fact that there is a lot of myth surrounding what is happening. As I have indicated, on average, only around four rural schools have closed each year since 1999. That is the reality. Many closures have not been opposed, and we have to approve each and every proposal on the basis of the guidance. If pupils will not benefit, I will not support a closure. There is a difference in the pattern of school provision within and across local authority areas, and we are trying to assist them in terms of federations and area schools, which have developed as a valuable concept. I hope that you will bring out effective practice in your report and respond to the federation of governing bodies. It is important that local authorities use their funding for education in a cost-effective way, and we need to guide and support them in that. Estyn needs to guide us carefully—as it does, and as it did with the 2006 report—on the performance of small primary schools in Wales. We have different roles to play, but the Assembly Government has a duty to rise above that in terms of a holistic, effective and manageable policy that feeds into the guidance for our local authorities across Wales.

[26] **Michael German:** We heard from Estyn that the issue driving this forward is not pupil attainment—it said that it could not identify a difference between high attainment and low attainment based on the size of a school—but having new or substantially refurbished school buildings, which was a cash measure in itself. You mentioned federalism, clustering and area schools, and you will know that this is an issue that is close to my heart. It has been put to us several times that the problem for schools and local authorities looking for an alternative approach is that it involves the closure of existing schools and the opening of a new venture; it was put to us strongly that the mention of the word ‘closure’ was likely to cause great anxiety in every community. You have said that you are intent upon changing the legislation to make the federalisation or clustering of schools a much easier process. Can you guarantee that that will happen in the next six to nine months?

[27] **Jane Hutt:** To be clear about what we will be doing in the next few months in relation to federation, we are working on the federation of governing bodies. This is about the option of promoting a federation of governing bodies. This kind of arrangement has come out of actual experience and policy development at a local level, where it was deemed to be helpful. As you rightly said, Mike, there are issues around the word ‘closure’, however it is presented—unless it is in cases like the 31 per cent of cases that have opted for closure; sometimes it is a governing body that makes that decision. It is about school reorganisation and planning school places, but the need to promote the federation of governing bodies came to us as a local policy issue development. We are not looking at making changes in terms of federated schools under the 1998 legislation, although we are reviewing its impact.

11.50 a.m.

[28] What is interesting is the development of area schools. I was just asking my officials about the definition of an area school; it emerged as a new school when other schools have closed. Again, I go back to the good developments. I went to Pembrokeshire to see Ysgol y Frenni, for example, which was highly controversial at the time—in fact, I believe that it went to a judicial review, did it not?

[29] **Ms Davies:** Yes.

[30] **Jane Hutt:** It is the most wonderful complex, housing children from the early years,

through primary to secondary, with a public library facility in between. It is an extraordinary complex, which I am sure committee members have seen. If you can address it, and take on the challenge, it is an example of what you can deliver. I am sure that there are many other examples that I can mention, which you will know about, such as Ysgol Bro Famau in Denbighshire, and Ysgol Bro Brynach in Carmarthenshire. In Powys, there are also examples of joint working between schools. Therefore, we have to look at how we can assist communities and families in addressing this challenge of educating their children.

[31] **Michael German:** May I pursue that issue of the 1998 legislation, which you just mentioned? If a community and a local authority decided that they would like to have, let us say, four schools with one single headteacher, under one administration, would that not be available to them without closing the existing schools? Or would that be part of the changes that you are proposing?

[32] **Jane Hutt:** No. On federated schools, as you say, it could mean closing schools and establishing a new school on separate sites, with one headteacher, one governing body, and one budget. In fact, under current regulations, as you know, schools can be rationalised without a need for further procedure, so we are not proposing to look at that. You might want to comment on that, Mary.

[33] **Ms Davies:** At the moment, it is possible to close one site of an amalgamated or federated school, achieved through the 1998 Act, without further procedures. It would mean a change to the school organisation regulations, but we are not considering that at the moment.

[34] **Michael German:** That was my point. That point has been put to us strongly—three times, I believe, lastly by a local education authority. Therefore, it would still be difficult for a group of schools to come together with a single headteacher without having to go through a procedure that requires the effective closure of the whole thing, and then reopening as another system. Am I clear on that point?

[35] **Ms Davies:** The federated governing body regulations have not finally been drawn up for consultation yet. It would be possible, in theory, to look at different models of staffing schools where the governing bodies were federated. That could possibly include the consideration of one headteacher.

[36] **Michael German:** I am not absolutely clear as to whether you would have to close the existing schools.

[37] **Ms Davies:** No, not for federated governing body arrangements. However, those regulations do not exist yet; they will be going out to consultation in due course. The content of the regulations has not yet been finalised; that is likely to be done by spring 2009. There will obviously be consultation on the regulations prior to their being finalised, and it may be possible to suggest that federated governing bodies could appoint a headteacher to cover more than one school.

[38] **Mr Williams:** In those instances, the important thing to remember is that, under those new regulations, the schools will remain separate schools, albeit with a single governing body, and possibly a single headteacher, and so on. If, in the future, the local authority decided to bring forward a proposal to close one of the individual sites, it would require statutory proposals.

[39] **Michael German:** I want to be absolutely clear about what I am trying to get at here. If you have four schools in a community, where you were proposing to keep all four buildings open, but there would be one headteacher, with a proper management structure for the staff, working as a team, but on four different sites, would that currently require a change to the

school? Would it require a closure and then a re-opening? Will your proposals still require that?

[40] **Mr Williams:** Under current regulations, in order to establish a school of that sort you would need to close all the schools—or at least two or three, or whatever it was that you actually intended to close—and then establish a new one on several sites. You are quite right in saying that, if a local authority, or a governing body for that matter, decided to discontinue provision on one of the sites, that would not require a statutory proposal. However, under the federated governing body regulations, the schools would come together voluntarily in the first instance, establish a single governing body and possibly one headteacher—that would depend on the detail of the regulations—and, subsequently, if it was decided that a site should be discontinued, you would need to bring forward a statutory proposal to do that, because they would technically remain separate schools.

[41] **Jane Hutt:** It is complex, but there are two separate issues here, Mike, as you understand. One is the issue about federated schools under the 1998 legislation and the other is this new development—this new policy proposal—that I do not think exists as an option outside Wales, but which relates to governing bodies. I hope that it is clear now that, in terms of federated schools, once a federation has gone through with some closures as part of that, if at a later date—correct me if I am wrong, officials—the local authority decided that it no longer needed one site, for example, it could close that site without further consultation. Does that help in terms of clarifying the point?

[42] **Michael German:** Yes, it is just that I—

[43] **Jane Hutt:** I think that the point that you are making is about how you get there.

[44] **Michael German:** Do you have to go through the whole procedure of establishing one single school on multiple sites through a round of closures? I know that you do at the moment, but, under your proposals, will you have to do that?

[45] **Mr Williams:** No, in effect—

[46] **Michael German:** In effect—

[47] **Jane Hutt:** The proposals are not looking at changing that at this point in time. There are new proposals about the federation of governing bodies and I think that the proposals cover issues that you raised. In fact, I recall that I answered the point when you brought forward a possible Measure about school closures as a backbencher. The Measure related to other issues like the impact on the community, community impact assessments and engaging with children and young people as part of the consultation exercise. That is part of the policy development, as are issues relating to the curriculum and the impact of curriculum changes on school reorganisation planning and proposals. Those are the kinds of issues that we will be looking at. We will certainly be drawing from some of the principal points that you made and the objectives that you set out in the Measure that you brought to the Assembly.

[48] **Brynle Williams:** The committee has heard evidence that there is concern about understanding how to measure the impact on a community of school reorganisation. Minister, how do you think that the impact on a community of the closure of a small school should be measured to ensure that it is done effectively?

[49] **Jane Hutt:** That is a very important point and it follows nicely on from what I said about following up some of the objectives in Mike's original Measure proposal. On the impact on the community, we have a proactive policy in terms of the funding arrangements that we have for small and rural schools, which does include, of course, a measure in terms of

community focus. I have already laid that out quite clearly in my written statement on funding. On the elements of the funding that we have for small and rural schools, one is for community focus and the other is to support heads and schools to work together and to make sure that the community focus is key. In terms of the current guidance, there are several references to the role of the school in the community.

12.00 p.m.

[50] When proposals are being developed—and, indeed, when disputed cases are put to me—we take into account the critical role of the school in the community and the fact that schools are important to their communities. When we come forward with our revised guidance, we must have a much more rigorous examination of the impact on the community. It may be necessary to have community impact appraisals as a precursor to bringing forward a proposal. It would be interesting to know whether the committee would favour that. We have some good examples, such as Ysgol y Dderi in Ceredigion, which was created as a result of the closure of a number of small village schools several years ago. That school now provides a focus and a venue for a number of community activities. The local authority did that as part of its closure plan; it looked at what could replace it or what it could develop. So, it is a matter of being proactive and about looking at the community impact and focus. The funding could be used to enable that. So, it is very sensitive, but a community impact appraisal may be the way forward in helping local authorities to develop their school planning proposals.

[51] **Alun Davies:** In your written evidence, Minister, you set out key considerations in the determination of proposals to change the pattern of school provision, and you have laid out a number of criteria there. Over the page, you talk about the particular considerations affecting rural schools and about the impact on the community. Last week, we visited the communities around Crymych that were affected by the closures that led to the creation of Ysgol y Frenni. I attended a meeting in Bwlch-y-Groes that evening. Bwlch-y-Groes school closed in 2000—eight years ago—and people are still talking about the impact that that had on the community. Some of the most powerful evidence that we have received over the past few weeks as part of this inquiry has been about the impact of a school closure on the community. A number of people have said that it would tear the heart out of the community and would have a very negative impact on the ability of a community to be a cohesive geographical entity. To what extent do these issues determine your decisions on school closures?

[52] **Jane Hutt:** I am sure that the evidence that you have gathered in talking at that level to communities is very important, but I am sure that you also gained a lot of information about the benefits of the changes and developments. Our current guidance states that authorities need to consider the effect of the proposal on any existing community use of the schools, the effect of the closure, the extent to which the school is serving the whole community as a learning resource, which is important for the adults and families in the community as well as the children, and the options for maintaining community facilities. That is what we would consider at the moment in relation to any proposal. So, this gives clear guidance to local authorities on community impact, but perhaps we need to strengthen that and enable a more effective engagement of communities.

[53] I have met authorities that have achieved school reorganisation, from Pembrokeshire to Monmouthshire, with Blaenau Gwent in the middle. In the experience of those three authorities, engaging the community in the process was critical. The outcome might still be hard for a community to take, but it has proven to be effective for the educational benefit, the opportunity to make community use of facilities, and to extend the facilities as I described happened in Ceredigion. Tough decisions still have to be made to engage in that kind of forthright decision-making, but if you engage with the community and with parents and if the governors take a leading role in being proactive and reactive, you can have effective change

in Wales, and we have examples of that.

[54] **Alun Davies:** An issue put to us by parents in our meetings in Hermon last week was that of engagement and consultation with the community. I think that it is fair to say that many of the parents there did not feel that they had been consulted; they felt as though they had been railroaded into the closure of these schools, and compelled to send their children to this new school, Ysgol y Frenni, notwithstanding their wishes. Does the Government have minimum standards in its guidance, and does that guidance describe the consultation and community engagement that is expected from local education authorities in making and bringing forward these proposals?

[55] **Jane Hutt:** I have mentioned the fact that I have learned from authorities that have achieved change effectively. One could possibly develop some kind of code of practice for consultation. We could possibly have a template in the review of guidance. It is not public consultation; it is actual participation. It is engaging communities and those affected at the start of the process and not halfway through when they have been cooked. They are the ingredients for change. We would value the committee's views on that.

[56] However, it goes back to finding out where there has been good practice and change, and learning from that. We know that that is how to develop policy in Wales.

[57] **Michael German:** I want to go back to the issue of appropriate and new and refurbished school buildings, as that seems to be the driver for change, because that is how we define it. What typifies a 'small school' and a 'very small school'? Is there a definition? When does a school become 'small' and then 'very small'? The difference is not very clear to me. In addition, can you tell us your definition of 'deep rural', which is another phrase that we seem to find in Government documents? I do not quite understand the difference between 'rural' and 'deep rural'. Do you have a definition that we could use?

[58] **Jane Hutt:** Looking at the situation in Wales now, we see that 15 per cent of primary schools have fewer than 50 pupils on the roll. We have far smaller schools comparatively than the situation in England where only 4 per cent have fewer than 50 pupils on the roll. We have mentioned the Audit Commission's financial assessments and challenges in relation to small schools and falling rolls, but, as a Government, we have not sought to indicate what school size is considered to be appropriate or inappropriate, because we know that small schools can be very effective at delivering education. They may be more costly, but we look to our local authorities to organise education efficiently and effectively and to look at their community realities. I will not be drawn on Government policy or parameters on size. The evidence is all there.

[59] On what is 'deep rural', I am certainly aware of sparsity and I seek to understand issues relating to rurality and weighting in various formulae. Mary or Paul may want to comment on this, but I cannot recall seeing the phrase 'deep rural' in our guidance.

[60] **Michael German:** I think that there was mention of support for deep rural areas in your 'One Wales' document, was there not?

[61] **Alun Davies:** The definition is a year 2 objective.

[62] **Jane Hutt:** Let me put it like this: we do not use it in school reorganisation guidance.

12.10 p.m.

[63] **Alun Ffred Jones:** Bu ichi ddweud **Alun Ffred Jones:** You said in your yn eich tystiolaeth eich bod yn ystyried evidence that you consider the impact of a

effaith cau'r ysgol ar y gymuned fel rhan o'r broses o asesu pa un a ddylid cau ysgol. Un gŵyn a wnaed yng nghyfarfod yr wythnos diwethaf oedd nad oes dim ffordd o fesur nac asesu yr effaith honno ar y gymuned. A ydych yn bwriadu creu rhyw fath o arweiniad a fydd yn rhoi llawer mwy o siâp i unrhyw ystyriaeth fel hon yn y dyfodol pan fydd awdurdodau lleol yn ystyried cau ysgol?

school closure on the community as part of assessing whether to close a school. A complaint that was made at last week's meeting is that there is no way of measuring or assessing that impact on a community. Do you intend to create guidance that will give a much better form to any such consideration in the future when a local authority is considering whether to close a school?

[64] **Jane Hutt:** This appears to be emerging as quite an important factor for the way forward. We have dealt with the issue about effective community engagement and the fact that you have received feedback that that is not perceived to be the case for many of those who have been engaged in this process. However, as you said, Alun Ffred, there is a view about the damage that a school closure may cause the community. We must find a way of identifying good practice and issuing guidance to support local authorities in taking this forward. The community impact appraisal has to be a tool, and I ask the committee to consider that as an option. From my experience—and not just as a politician and Minister—I know that community participation in community impact appraisals is quite intensive. It is about what will happen to the community and the school building, what other opportunities the community has, what funding is available, and what good practice there is in the rest of Wales and further afield. I gave the example of Ysgol y Dderi in Ceredigion, which now houses a range of activities across villages. There is also an example in Powys where two schools are to close in September. I am sure that you will be aware of this, Alun. Authorities are looking at improvements to community halls as well as ensuring that school equipment is transferred and is available. All these factors must be taken into account in assessing damage to the community, because schools are community assets.

[65] **Alun Ffred Jones:** Byddai'n ddiddorol cael y dystiolaeth honno am Ysgol y Dderi, os oes tystiolaeth gadarn am y datblygiadau cymunedol wedyn.

Alun Ffred Jones: It would be interesting to have that evidence on Ysgol y Dderi, if there is hard evidence about subsequent community developments.

[66] Wrth gyflwyno eich sylwadau, bu ichi ddweud bod rhaid i ddisgyblion fod ar eu hennill o unrhyw ad-drefnu, a dyna oedd un o'ch meini prawf. Sut ydych yn asesu hynny, a pam ydych o'r farn y byddai cau ysgol yn gwella'r cyfleoedd i ddisgybl?

You said in your introduction that pupils must benefit from any reorganisation, and that that was your criterion. How do you assess that, and why do you believe that closing a school improves the opportunities for a pupil?

[67] **Jane Hutt:** It goes back to the guidance in the circular and the guidance that we received from Estyn. If we go back to the 2002 guidance, we see that the key consideration in assessing the impact of a proposal is the effect on the standard of education provided in the area. However, it is useful to go back to see what Estyn regards to be an issue in relation to the guidance and advice. The Estyn guidance goes back to its evaluation of small schools, but it has to be a question of ensuring that the effectiveness of education is maintained. Estyn's report on small primary schools notes the educational challenges, and we know that very small age cohorts can lead to reduced opportunities. Mixed-age school classes have their challenges, and there are also challenges for teachers in delivering national curriculum subjects.

[68] There may be schools with only one or two teachers, and there may be supervision issues and issues relating to emergencies or accidents. A weak teacher can have a huge impact on a very small school. All of these are linked to school effectiveness issues. It is in the guidance that we will have to test out, with Estyn's support, all of those issues in terms of the

impact of a reorganisation and closure.

[69] **Alun Ffred Jones:** Mae tystiolaeth yr Athro Reynolds, a gyflwynwyd yma, yn awgrymu bod cryn fodlonrwydd o fewn ysgolion sydd wedi eu had-drefnu—hynny yw, yr ysgolion ardal newydd—ymhlith yr athrawon a'r rhieni. Dyna mae ef yn ei dystio. Yr oedd llawer iawn o'r rhai sy'n gwrthwynebu ad-drefnu yn difrïo tystiolaeth yr Athro Reynolds gan ddweud bod y sampl a ddefnyddiwyd yn rhy fach. Y mae ef wedi cydnabod bod angen gwneud mwy o waith ymchwil. A ydych yn bwriadu gwneud mwy o waith ymchwil yn y cyfeiriad hwn er mwyn cael tystiolaeth gadarnach i fod yn sail i'ch polisiau?

Alun Ffred Jones: Professor Reynolds's evidence, which was presented here, suggests that there is a high degree of contentment in the schools that have been reorganised—namely, the new area schools—among the parents and teachers. That is what he attests. Many of those who oppose reorganisation decry Professor Reynolds's evidence, saying that the sample used was too small. He has acknowledged that more research needs to be done. Do you intend to undertake more research in this direction in order to have a firmer evidence base for your policies?

[70] **Jane Hutt:** At the time, I welcomed the research that Professor Reynolds undertook on school closures in Wales, although I recognised that he used a very small sample, which he has also recognised. When reading the evidence that he gave you, I was interested to see that he said how surprised he was by his evidence, which came from two cohorts, not just one, although it was a small sample. The evidence—I think that he talked about its being counterintuitive—that came through was consistent.

[71] The difficulty in terms of further research, which he recognised, as did Professor Bramley, is that you can do statistical desktop research, but, often, qualitative research in terms of the impact on the community, for example, and the engagement of partners in changes might be, if not more valuable, then equally as valuable as statistical research. I have asked my officials whether we have any research from the rest of the UK or the rest of the world that would be helpful to us in this respect. We are in a very unique position in Wales, because we have so many small schools with very low numbers. I think that we would have to be very clear and careful about the kind of research that we would undertake and who would do it.

[72] I am not closing down that option, but I would say that we cannot wait for research before continuing with the task that we have before us. I am not bringing politics into this, but we have just had the local government elections, and we hope that we will now have four years of stability at a local authority level. We are revising our guidance, and your report will be very helpful to us. I think that communities want to know where they are, and I hope that there will be some momentum to have a responsible and effective approach to the planning of school places in Wales, to provide the best educational outcomes for our children and young people.

[73] **Alun Davies:** Thank you very much. I think that that is a good point on which to bring this session to an end. Thank you very much for giving of your time, Minister, and thank you for your written submission and for answering our questions. We will have some written questions for you, Minister, which I will write to you with, following this meeting.

[74] Our next and final committee meeting for this term will be next Wednesday, when we will consider our final report into poverty and deprivation in rural Wales.

[75] Diolch yn fawr.

Thank you very much.

Daeth y cyfarfod i ben am 12.19 p.m.
The meeting ended at 12.19 p.m.