

# Enterprise and Learning Committee

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## Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to present Estyn's views on the Welsh Assembly Government School Organisation Proposals (consultation document No 060/2008) education provision and the reorganisation of schools in rural Wales.

## Background

This paper deals with issues raised in Welsh Assembly Government School Organisation Proposals proforma (consultation document No 060/2008) as identified by the Enterprise and Learning Committee in their invitation to Estyn to give evidence. This paper also sets the background and context for the School Organisation Proposals and the present challenges facing promoters. This evidence will be based on findings from Estyn's inspection and remit work.

The paper is organised under the following areas including those identified as being the focus of the consultation:

The role of Estyn in reporting on schools and LEAs;

Estyn's findings from inspections;

The impact of amalgamating schools and or new builds

Quality and size of school;

Existing and proposed Welsh Assembly Government policy and guidance;

Wider social and educational issues associated with school reorganisation, such as the impact on rural communities and the Welsh language;

The educational context of small schools; and

The school organisation proposals.

## The role of Estyn in reporting on schools and LEAs.

Estyn inspects and reports on schools in a 6 year cycle. In the inspection of schools Estyn's main focus is on educational outcomes. Inspectors report on standards, quality, ethos and leadership. Reports only comment on the size of the school if this had a direct and clearly discernible impact on any of these aspects and whether this impact was positive or negative. Estyn individual school inspection reports do not address value for money in relation to school size and pupil numbers. School inspections do not link per capita pupil costs and the quality of outcomes.

In the cycle of inspection of local authorities Estyn inspectors look closely at how and why the local authority determines its priorities in education and judge whether these are appropriate. As part of the focus on both management and prospects for improvement inspectors will look at the management of resources and whether local authority spending on education offers good value for money. The number of surplus places, the cost per head per pupil and the extent to which the authority has planned for future developments are all important sources of evidence which contribute to final judgements

## Estyn's findings from inspections

School reorganisation is inspected as part of Access and School Places in LA inspections. This includes:

the provision of an appropriate range and number of school places;

asset management planning and the educational capital programme;

admissions to schools;

home - school transport; and

co-ordination of the Early Years.

Estyn has inspected Access and School places in seven LA Inspections since the present cycle started in April 2006. The LA inspections make two main judgements, how good is present performance and what are the prospects for improvement.

1 The local authority's performance will be rated on a four-point scale as follows:

Grade 1 - good with outstanding features

Grade 2 - good features and no important shortcomings

Grade 3 - good features outweigh shortcomings

Grade 4 - shortcomings in important areas

2 The local authority's prospects of improvement will be rated on a four-point scale:

Grade 1 improvement prospects are good, with significant improvements already in place

Grade 2 - improvement prospects are good, with no major barriers

Grade 3 - some good prospects, but barriers in important areas

Grade 4 - many important barriers to improvement

The grades for Access and school places are the weakest grades for any of the LA education services. Only two of the nine authorities have had grade 2 or better for performance and only three LAs have had grade 2 or better prospects for improvement.

Inspectors found that many LAs do not have a clear long term strategy for reducing surplus places that is linked to improving school buildings. As a result, they have a lot of work to do to address the challenge of a falling school population. Surplus places cost LAs an estimated £30 million per year.

Only a very few LAs are on target to have school buildings fit for purpose. All LAs have extensive information about the condition, suitability and sufficiency of school buildings, including data about the number of places that are located in temporary accommodation. They have limited capital funds to invest in new builds.

## Unfilled Places

Latest available published and verified WAG data January 2007

| All 22 LEAs   | Primary | Secondary | Total   |
|---|---------|-----------|---------|
| Total number of schools                                       | 1,527   | 224       | 1,751   |
| Total capacity of schools                                     | 283,043 | 243,471   | 526,514 |
| Net unfilled places   | 47,180  | 33,134    | 80,314  |
| Net unfilled as percentage of total capacity                  | 16.7    | 13.6      | 15.3    |
| Number of small schools                                       | 461     | 53        | 514     |
| Number of small schools with significant surplus capacity     | 191     | 21        | 212     |
| Percentage of small schools with significant surplus capacity | 41.4    | 39.6      | 41.2    |
| Number of small schools oversubscribed                        | 40      | 7         | 47      |

Too many LAs have not taken enough robust actions to reduce surplus places. When considering reducing surplus places they should take account of:

improving pupils standards;

improving the quality of provision and outcomes;

improving school buildings;

strategies to regenerate communities; and

the needs of Welsh-speaking communities

Local Authorities, especially those serving rural areas, are supporting small schools to work more effectively together. This includes making arrangements for schools to:

come together for lessons such as physical education;

share teaching expertise between schools;

work together to plan the curriculum; and

share one headteacher for a group of schools.

### **The impact of amalgamating schools and or new builds**

Estyn's report on an evaluation of performance of schools before and after moving into new buildings or significantly refurbished premises included in the survey many schools based on an amalgamation of smaller ones that had been closed. We found that:

In all schools, better buildings contribute to improving one or more of the performance areas.

Ageing school buildings which are in a poor state of repair cannot meet modern teaching and learning needs. Inadequate buildings make improvements in standards of achievement more challenging.

In nearly all schools with new or refurbished buildings that we surveyed, pupils' attainment and achievement have improved. In some cases the improvement in attainment has been significant, especially in a few schools in communities with high level of social and economic deprivation.

Estyn inspection report findings show that the quality of teaching has improved in those schools that have moved into a new or refurbished building. Improvements in the quality of buildings have a very beneficial effect on the quality of teaching and morale of staff which has a positive effect on pupil performance.

Most schools offer pupils more choices than in their previous buildings because they have more space and better facilities. Also, the provision the school makes for before-school and after-school activities significantly improves.

### **Quality and size of school**

Inspection evidence shows that the quality in educational provision is by and large a function of the quality of leadership and management and the quality of teaching and learning. This is a product of how well headteachers and teachers plan and do their work. The quality of leadership and teaching is a more important factor than the overall size of a school.

If a large school had a high proportion of weak to average teachers then the standards will not be as high as they are in a small school whose teachers are of average to good quality. On the other hand if one teacher in a small school is weak then they will have a disproportionate effect on pupils because they will be taught by the teacher for a higher proportion of their school careers than they would if they were in a large school.

Generally speaking, in small schools, the teaching challenge is greater. Classes will include a wider age and ability range than in larger schools, even if those classes may be smaller. There is no evidence that small schools have better outcomes than large schools.

The other important factor that affects the quality of outcomes is the socio-economic context of schools. High levels of social deprivation in a school catchment will tend to correlate with the attainment of pupils. This is not always the case and we can point to many examples of schools that succeed in spite of these factors as well as many so-called 'coasting schools in areas of relative prosperity.

### **Existing and proposed Welsh Assembly Government policy and guidance**

The policy line has been to make re-organisation a matter for local education authorities. However, final decisions for closure have to receive Ministerial consent.

Statutory procedures make closing schools complex and prolonged. For example one school with two pupils was able to carry on for another year because of parental objections to closure. Re-organisation is a difficult and slow process which often has elements of high-risk for local politicians. Wider issues are taken into account as part of the objections to closure and re-organisation. There is a general consensus that the status quo is not an option but the process of rationalisation is too cumbersome.

Currently there is a lack of national strategic direction, guidelines and targets for LAs to address issues to do with increasing numbers of surplus places in schools.

### **Wider social and educational issues associated with school reorganisation, such as the impact on rural communities and the Welsh language**

The closure of a school is frequently politically controversial and there is often an understandable reluctance to close something which is seen as an integral part of rural life. It is much easier for other long-standing facilities in rural areas to close or be closed. Because of this the school is often the last remaining focal point of rural communities. This tends to heighten their emotional appeal and the school's

continued survival can come to be seen as the difference between the community surviving as a viable social entity or not. In most cases this argument is an over statement but the school does provide a means of inter-action between parents and the wider community that cannot be easily replaced.

The other issue is that rural school reorganisation invariably means longer days for many pupils. This raises the prospect of extra use of cars and longer times out of the house for pupils. Travelling time is something that needs particular consideration when reorganising provision for under-fives and infants.

A very common concern about re-organisation of rural schools is that it will lead to children being taught in bigger size classes.

Almost all recent educational research and the findings of inspection evidence conclude that, across the whole primary phase, there is no clear link between class size and pupils' achievement.

There are many indications that teaching 25-30 same-age pupils is easier to organise than 15-20 mixed age. This is especially so where the gap in ages is at least 2 years or where pupils are in different key stages of the National Curriculum;

It is extremely difficult to develop effective teaching and learning to meet all the needs of a small class of widely differing ages;

Having a small number of teachers increases teacher workload; and

Small schools limit the range of sporting, social and cultural interaction and activities that depend on large group or team playing.

Another frequently voiced concern is that the re-organisation of schools especially rural schools militates against the Welsh language. The areas of Wales where Welsh is a daily language spoken by the majority of people include the largely rural areas of North Carmarthenshire, North Pembrokeshire, Ceredigion, Ynys Môn, South Gwynedd and upland villages in Conwy, North Powys and Denbighshire. However, there is no evidence that, when the smaller schools in these areas close and children transfer to larger schools standards in Welsh declines.

The associated argument that the local school acts as a kind of repository for the language is valid in relation to the fact that a Welsh medium school has the language in its work and daily life. Nevertheless, there is little to suggest that this has been a powerful incentive for the adults in these areas who do not speak Welsh to learn the language.

In responding to closure and re-organisation proposals Estyn focuses solely on the potential impact of the quality of education provided and the standards pupils achieve. This would include factors such as the likely effect of increased travel times on pupils, any change in the linguistic character of provision or the loss of any specialist facilities.

### **The Educational Context of Small Schools;**

The over-riding feature of many rural schools is their small size. Using the definition of the Audit Commission of 90 pupils or less, about a third of primary schools in Wales can be classified as small schools. The great majority of these are located in rural areas. Using the definition of the Audit Commission of 600 pupils or less, just under 25% of secondary schools in Wales can be classified as small schools.

Around half of these are located in rural areas. The main reasons for the differences in the proportion of primary and secondary schools in rural areas is that a combination of the following lead to a higher proportion of small secondary than small primary schools in both large urban and post industrial areas.

travel considerations;

parental choice;

economic decline; and

denominational schools.

Overall, there is little difference in the standards achieved by pupils or in the quality of education provided by small primary or secondary schools when compared with other schools. Whilst there is variation in performance between schools, there is no evidence to support the view that size is a significant factor. (A copy of Estyn's report on Small Primary Schools in Wales is attached)

Small schools generally do not do so well as other schools in areas of leadership and management, staff development and curriculum planning. This is especially the case in small primary schools, when the headteacher has a substantial teaching commitment and there is less time for leadership and management tasks. The same is true of small secondary schools where senior managers not only have relatively heavy teaching loads but also have responsibilities that are taken on by middle managers in larger school.

Other contextual issues that impact on rural schools are described below.

Many primary schools in rural areas were built in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The buildings are increasingly not fit for purpose in terms of providing an education in line with WAG policy and expectations. In a good number there is a lack of modern facilities and equipment, (for example for work in physical education) or even a school hall.

Difficulties in recruiting staff are common because of the reluctance of many young people to leave urban environments; high property prices; perceived high workloads and a sense that they might feel isolated.

the challenge for schools in traditionally Welsh-speaking areas of teaching an increasing proportion of pupils who do not speak Welsh at home.

the increasing expectations of the wider community of the social role of the school as other rural facilities decline in number or close (church/chapel, shop, garage, post office, pub). Some schools are more community focused than others, offering facilities for youth clubs and adult learning.

### **Summary: The school organisation proposals.**

At present there does not seem to be a clear strategic direction or agreed actions between WAG and individual authorities on when and how they will address the growing challenge of surplus places, surplus school and buildings not fit for purpose.

The detail in these consultation proposals has the potential to make it possibly more difficult for local authorities to deliver their own strategies to address the need to reduce school places, surplus schools and to deliver education in fit for purpose buildings and meet Welsh Assembly policies stated in Iaith Pawb and The Learning Country: Vision into Action.

Adopting a key principles approach in section 1.7 to whole local authority strategies would be more pragmatic if WAG is seeking to deliver a more efficient school system in better quality buildings. After accepting a local authority strategy then consultation on proposals could be broader. For examples, consultation on broad proposals for a group or cluster of schools to deliver change rather than the individual school approach suggested here. The suggested approach in the consultation document places a heavy demand on local authority resources in a period of time when most authorities are looking to make efficiency savings.

Section 2.2 Consideration of proposals by Welsh Ministers asks Ministers to look in far broader terms at the proposals than the level of detail that is required by promoters. This key principal approach is one we would recommend Local authorities adopt to agreed strategies with the Minister. Sections 1.7, 1.14 and 1.16 are very detailed, demanding of promoters and overly bureaucratic. As well there are elements in 1.16 that are time consuming, will slow the process unduly, extremely subjective and would be difficult to bring consistency into decision making.

If the approach suggested in this circular is to be pursued then Estyn would suggest further clarification in section 1.7. Examples of the need for clarification include the following:

Second bullet point - definition of adequate financial resources.

Third bullet point - what does accessibility refer to here?

Fourth bullet point - maintenance implies keeping the status quo. Suggest further promote or develop.

Eighth bullet - proportion of places - needs quantifying - in practice does it mean no less?

Fourteenth bullet - LA agreed date with whom? When have these dates and strategies to implement been agreed? Who has the responsibility for monitoring delivery to match agreed dates?

Sixteenth bullet - this is a very difficult bullet to address especially the social cohesion element.

Although welcoming a broad recommendation that recycling assets from surplus school buildings and sites set out in paragraph 1.12 back into education would be seen as good practice, however, there is a danger of this recommendation being seen as supporting education being dealt with as a stand alone element of Local Authority resourcing rather than as part of more integrated approach to children's services and other aspects of LA services.

LAs set priorities according to risk agreed with regulators in the Wales Programme for Improvement programme. As a result we would expect to see resources matched to those risks. Given that strategies that can only be delivered within finite resources, this recommendation should be worded as an expectation and not as a necessity.

Estyn recognises that such language and community appraisals have merit but should not dominate the overall decision making process. Schools are primarily establishments to deliver education. Undertaking community impact appraisals and language impact are important in forming LA strategies. However, they could become barriers to delivering educational change as the three elements do not always align comfortably. This would be particular true in some urban and Welsh speaking areas and could cause social rifts and promote linguistic division.

Estyn is of the view that surplus schools and places is a far broader issue than small schools. As we have mentioned earlier, reducing surplus places and surplus schools is as much an urban as a rural issue. The consultation should be careful as not to be perceived to be targeting small and rural school. The principles should be consistent with all schools. We would suggest leaving this section out as there is no definition of what constitutes a small school in Wales.

Finally, assessing cost effectiveness would be very difficult. Promoters would be able to demonstrate efficiency by demonstrating possible savings on energy, staffing, travel but would not be able to answer the value for money (VFM) question. They would only be able to use other sources to explain how schools could be better and more effective.