

BEGUILDY

A case study of the impact on a rural community of the closure of the village primary school

Background:

The catchment area for Beguildy Church in Wales Primary School, which closed on 31st December, 2013, was an area between the south side of the Dolfor Hills and Knucklas village, bounded on the western edge by the Beacon Hill Range. The school was located in the geographical centre of this area in the village of Beguildy. The area, in the upper reaches of the Teme Valley, is approximately 12 miles long and 4 miles wide and is divided by the boundary of the Powys and Shropshire Local Authorities which is the national boundary between Wales and England. The catchment, served by Beguildy Community Council, is made up of the villages of Beguildy and Knucklas, the hamlets of Heyope, Lloyney, Dutlas and Felindre, smaller scattered settlements such as Crug-y-buddar and outlying farmsteads.

The former school site and buildings:

Beguildy School Hall provided the only meeting hall in the village, hosting amongst other events Christmas Fayres, Harvest Festival Suppers, Church Fundraisers and funeral teas. The school grounds, as the only community open space in the upper Teme Valley, provided a venue for outdoor community activities. Beguildy Community Council, anxious to preserve this asset for the community, submitted an Expression of Interest Form to Powys County Council.

The Community Council was unable to pursue its interest because The Church in Wales, as co-owners of the property, although sympathetic in principle, stated: *'As the Diocesan Trust is a charity, it has to deal with its land in accordance with the Charities Act and that means, if it disposes of the land, obtaining the best price for the charitable trust.'* In order to obtain the best price, land and buildings would have to be sold as one lot thus precluding the Community Council from pursuing separate expressions of interest.

The Church added: *'The former school is held by the Diocesan trust on educational trusts. If those trusts fail (i.e. the school closes) then the school has to be sold unless an alternative use is found for it, which includes educational activities.'* It was felt that continued use of the building by the Parent and Toddler Group and the meetings of the YFC would not meet this criterion which could only be met fully by continuing the intended purpose of the building as a school.

The site is zoned in the Local Development Plan for residential use but two years on, a buyer has not been found and it stands as an obvious visual daily reminder of what has been lost. The previously well-maintained grounds, which provided excellent opportunities for outdoor learning and were, as stated, the only outdoor community recreation space in the upper Teme Valley, are now an unloved and untended eyesore at the heart of the village as no maintenance has been carried out behind the locked gates since the closure on 31st December, 2013. The school building itself also shows visible signs of decay as a result of the lack of maintenance.

Education in a Welsh school or in a rural setting?

'I would encourage Powys ... to consider carefully any changes to provision which would result in Welsh pupils being routinely educated at English schools' Leighton Andrews (Then WG Education Minister).

The school drew learners from both Wales and England as the catchment ran along the boundary of the Powys and Shropshire Local Authorities. Powys LA presented Knighton Church in Wales Primary School as the designated receiving school but this did not satisfy

many of the parents who wished their children to continue to receive their education in a small rural school environment such as they had experienced themselves and which they valued so much at Beguildy. As a result, the children are now dispersed to six other schools on both sides of the county/national boundary.

Fragmentation of the community

The parents who used to meet daily as they dropped off their children or attended events and fund raising activities at the school now find that their opportunity for frequent interaction has been diminished and, with it, the feeling of connection and cohesion within the community. The children will be further divorced from their traditional community as they follow their new-found friends on to the different secondary schools in whose catchments their new primary schools are situated. This, in turn, weakens the numbers attending organisations such as the local YFC as, again, they follow their new friends to clubs outside the once close-knit community.

Where once there was life in the village during term time there is now a feeling of 'deadness'. Older members of the community now have little contact with the youngest members, especially if they do not have immediate family living locally. The school had an excellent record of promoting inter-generational contact with weekly events at the school such as the 'Cosy Cafe' and invitations to performances and presentations. Again, the participation of the pupils in Church events provided opportunities for young and old to unite.

Increased journey times for children and less access to extra-curricular activities

Cost saving was one of the arguments used to justify the decision to close the school but data collected by Powys County Council with regard to transport costs was flawed and did not provide a reliable indication of overall cost savings. In calculating transport costs, PCC asserted that 'the cost of home to school transport will be broadly no higher after closure than before' yet had to increase the estimated calculation on which Cabinet had reached its initial decision. In addition to the cost, children are now being ferried to several different schools, many with increased journey times, and are also less able to participate fully in extra-curricular activities.

The Parent and Toddler group

The thriving Parent and Toddler Group was homeless when the school closed and has re-located to Felindre Village Hall. Although still well supported, numbers have fallen because the location is not as accessible as the centrally located school.

Impact on Beguildy Church

The Community Impact Assessment dismissed concerns that the community would be disadvantaged by the closure, citing the fact that it would retain its Church and village shop. The school's strong links with the Church cemented its place at the heart of the community with the children participating regularly in Church events which in turn encouraged the attendance of the parents. Since the closure, attendance has fallen and services have been reduced to two per month from the previous four. The Church also reports a significant drop in responses to fundraising. (An exacerbating factor is that there is perception, justified or otherwise, that the Church was not as vociferous in its support for this Church school as it might have been during the campaign against closure).

The Village shop – hub of the community

The village shop has seen a significant drop in its weekly turnover as the parents who used to call in routinely as they delivered or collected their children and pick up items on a casual basis and enjoy the exchange of local information now pass through and plan to do their weekly shop in larger settlements. When the current owner retires it is unlikely to remain as a village shop.

The future

All of the above detrimental aspects are evident now and will become even more apparent in the years to come as community cohesion is lost because the younger members are forming new bonds elsewhere and drawing their families with them.

The abandoned school site may be developed in the future for housing despite there being other designated sites within the village which are undeveloped. Any houses built will, in all likelihood, be sold to older occupiers thereby accelerating the increasingly elderly age profile of a community in decline.