

Bryn School Consultation Observations

These observations refer to the document issued on the NPT Website at the address:

<http://www.npt.gov.uk/default.aspx?page=6476>

The relevant titles being:

Consultation Document Bryn Primary school and Cwmafan Primary school,
Additional information Bryn Pontrhydyfen Cwmafan and Bryn Community Impact
Assessment.

Unless stated otherwise the observations made in this document relate to the first of the above documents.

This document was prepared and agreed by the members of BRAG and represents BRAG's input into the consultation process. An input which BRAG would expect to see reflected in the consultation report.

The headings of this document generally follow those in the consultation document "Consultation Document Bryn Primary school and Cwmafan Primary school" and this document should be read alongside the consultation document.

Background

Commitments made include insuring schools are in the right places. Right places for whom? Should the right place consider the safety of the children to and from their place of study, the environmental impact of the required journeys, the time taken for the journey?

Should the right place also include the environmental setting, one where children are in touch with nature, away from traffic pollution, away from noise pollution?

What does fit for the 21st century supposed to mean? Are Victorian built schools such as Cwmafan more 21st century than Bryn School? BRAG assume this reference to 21st Century schooling is merely a reference to the NPT document of this title which is about having schools in the right places, minimising surplus places and closing schools with a large maintenance backlog and is not about the schooling requirements of providing the educational needs of children that are required in the 21st century.

What are the experiences that meet the aspirations of young learners that cannot be delivered in the settings of Bryn Primary?

The report states that the review is based on:

- a. Education standards
- b. The need for places and the accessibility of the school
- c. The quality and suitability of school accommodation
- d. Effective financial management

No mention is made of the parents or future employers who fund the schools through their taxes or the children who use the schools.

Over the rather limited four categories chosen to form a basis for decision making, only half of these are given more than passing mention in the report.

The proposal and why the change is being proposed

It is intended that the change will take effect from 1st September 2015. Cwmavon School is currently undergoing the merger of Infants and Juniors, a relatively simple merger that is already causing disruption to the children's studies. Yet before this is given time to stabilise it is suggested that the merger from two more schools be added to this chaos. How does this help a child's education?

The stated capacity of Bryn School appears very unrealistic. 123 pupils plus staff safely housed in this small school? What is the realistic capacity that best meets the children's educational requirements rather than the minimum cost per child. A child's education is the country's future. What would the unfilled capacity percentage look like based on realistic figures. What would capacity look like in ten years if Bryn were to double in size as per the LDP?

It is proposed that cramming more pupils into Cwmafan will improve education levels. On what facts does the Council base this statement? Ofsted results as quoted by NASS in a rural education study (ref. smallschools.org.uk 12/11/14) states that the results clearly show that small rural schools excel and achieve equal or higher levels than their larger counterparts in urban areas.

Bryn School offers other qualities to its students, in common with other village schools that are not always assessed in audit. These are expressed in the following research:

Research by Human Scale Education (HSE, 2004) suggests that small rural schools do not only deliver good or outstanding academic achievements but also have much more to offer. The research describes how students' and teachers' attitudes are generally much more positive as is the social behaviour, children are much more likely to participate in extra-curricular activities, their attendance record is better, students self-regard in academic and general terms is higher and how interpersonal relationships are much more positive. Their research draws on findings in the USA and the United Kingdom. Francis (1992) reaches the conclusion that children in small schools are happier and have more positive attitudes towards their school.

The pupils of Bryn Primary school have shown many of the above attributes in their extracurricular activities undertaken with BRAG. This is also mentioned in the council's report on "Bryn Community Impact Assessment".

It is accepted that delivering the range and breadth of the curriculum can be a challenge for a small school but federation and mobility of teaching staff must surely be a more practical solution than transporting the whole school population!

This section also states that there will be sufficient accommodation at Cwmafan Primary school to provide for pupils who would have attended Bryn Primary school. The

equivalent statement also exists in the Pontrhydyfen consultation document. Does this really mean that Cwmafan currently has 122 spare spaces now plus room for the extra student places that will be required when the LDP housing proposals within the proposed extended catchment area are implemented?

After the initial consultation document was issued, NPT issued a further document, "Additional information Bryn Pontrhydyfen Cwmafan" which attempts to address this question. However, this does very much imply shoehorning pupils into all available space even before taking into account the LDP proposals for further increases in population from all three existing catchment areas. A major concern of parents at Cwmafan School now is the congestion outside the school at the start and end of the school day. Increased pupil numbers are only going to increase this danger.

With regard to the school condition survey, the Bryn Governors, in the consultation evening at the school, did not agree with the backlog maintenance estimate, suggesting the actual work required could be done for far less.

The report states a number of small school learner challenges exist which it states are quoted in the Estyn's report "Small Primary Schools in Wales". When BRAG checked this report the statements do not exist. However, in the consultation evening the officers admitted that was a mistake and that they had used a more recent report "School size and educational effectiveness". The officers provided a copy of this report to BRAG in the meeting. From this 28 page report, 8 sentences had been marked with a green highlight pen that presented a negative view on small schools. These sentences were the ones used in the consultation document. Clearly a 28 page document consists of very many sentences and finding 8 sentences from this same report that supports small schools is not difficult. On page 2 it states "there is little difference in the standards achieved by pupils or in the quality of education provided by small schools when compared with other schools", a little further down the page it states "many small schools, regardless of their size, have a good or very good ethos. In most small schools, staff work with a clear sense of purpose" and still on the same page it states "the partnership between parents and small schools is generally good. The quality and extent of parents' contribute to school life are best in the smallest schools. Often a special closeness develops between the smallest schools and parents, which contributes positively to school life" again on page 2 it states "there is no evidence to support the view that size is a significant factor. The quality of leadership and teaching is a more important factor than the overall size of the school". Such comments can be found throughout the document that suggest that moving pupils out of small schools does not guarantee any improvement in the standard of education, just by moving to page 3 of this 28 page document is the statement "A common feature of successful schools is good leadership. All schools, irrespective of size, can perform well where the quality of leadership is good or excellent. Where schools' overall performance is adequate or unsatisfactory, there is nearly always weakness in the quality of leadership." There would appear to be no clear evidence in any of the references presented by the council or in any other literature researched by BRAG that would suggest that educating children in large schools was any better than small schools. A good education is

dependent on far more factors than the size of the school and the very definition of a good education cannot be simply stated.

Once again, with reference to the consultation document, I can see no connection with the first statement and small schools. Federation should help with the second two statements to the same extent as would a large school environment without the downsides of large schools and large classes.

Under benefits of the proposal, on what grounds is diminished small school status a benefit?

What evidence exists that states classes of same age pupils gives greater learning opportunities? BRAG have found articles that state that interaction between mixed age groups reinforces learning for the older members when they help explain subjects to the younger members of the group in a peer to peer way that teachers cannot deliver.

The statement "Larger schools also present greater opportunities for wider friendship groups and a wider range of social sporting and cultural activities" needs some serious supporting references when applied to primary school age children already in a sizable group for this age. Who ever played in the primary school playground in groups of more than about a dozen? If there was any need at all for this within this age group, this could be delivered by a federated teaching staff using social media across many schools extending interaction far beyond the boundaries of Cwmavon.

The possible risks/ disadvantages section is already almost twice as long as the somewhat dubious advantages list and can be further extended with the following points.

- Unnecessary safety risks associated with additional travel.
- Travel problems in attending activities outside of the core school hours.
- No easy access for nursery school provision.
- More difficult community input and support of school activities.
- More difficult to link the curriculum to local knowledge in the way this has been very successfully done with a number of heritage projects, the most recent being the joint School / BRAG Big Lottery Heritage Project.
- (I am sure others in the village can keep adding to this list)

Impact of the proposal

Impact on pupils and parents section makes two sweeping statements without any supporting references or justification of any kind! The last sentence is a statement without context.

Impact on pupil admission is a lengthy section with little relevance to the consultation. It is pure administration.

Impact on travel arrangements states most pupils will have further to travel to school. Apart from two pupils attending from Cwmafan area and two from Pontrhydyfen, who most feel that Bryn School has something extra to offer, 81% will have further to travel to school.

The Assembly Transport Policy does not just state a walking distance it states that this must be along a safe walking route.

When adding the safe walking route requirement to the Bryn Primary school catchment area this again means all Bryn pupils will require transport.

The Assembly documents states that travel assessment should be performed and documented, complete with costs, as part of the consultation document. Although this information has been requested, up until the consultation evening in the school on 25th Nov 2014, this information was still not available. BRAG requested a copy of the information from the officers present at the consultation and provided them with a written email address. However, with the end of the consultation period now approaching an end, this has still not been provided.

Transport for nursery children is not currently required so this is less favourable than the status quo.

The total journey time door to classroom and home again is going to be considerably more than the current situation, probably way more than an hour a day. Although the council may consider this acceptable, it is clearly detrimental, especially for the younger children, compared to the current position.

We accept the sections on school staff, governors and Welsh language. However, in the consultation meeting, many of the mothers present did present very strong cases in support of how well Bryn School handles special needs. Some of the parents stated how they had moved their children to Bryn after having bad experiences in larger schools.

With regard to impact on the community, the statements placed in the consultation document are a very poor representation of that contained in the full report. The final consultation report must give a true representation of the community impact report not just take the couple of sentences that support the closure.

No details at all are given as to how alternatives will be provided and funded and for how long.

It also hints at the closure of the village hall suggesting we all then bus down to Cwmafan! Again at who's expense?

Options that have been considered

These simply take the statements made elsewhere in the document that support the case for closure. As already identified, some of these statements are of questionable validity. Statements running counter to the closure proposal are ignored. Unless a balanced argument is presented in this section, the options should be quoted without further text allowing the people voting on this proposal to read the full document and cast their votes accordingly.

Details of the schools affected

This states Bryn Primary school receives £88k more than schools funded at the average per pupil cost. What proportion of this extra cost is due to high level of free school meals, additional learning needs and pupils with statements? Since these pupils will still need to be taught I assume these extra costs will still exist?

What is the essential element of the Bryn backlog maintenance and what is the essential proportion of the Cwmafan backlog? What is the best competitive quote for the essential maintenance?

Could the pupils at Cwmafan, with additional learning needs, be better catered for at Bryn with the smaller classes? This presumably could give an overall saving?

Why the references to capital build, building repairs, etc. being a separate budget for Cwmafan but no such mention for Bryn?

Why mention the infant and junior school amalgamation in this proposal as this has already been initiated and is hence irrelevant to this proposal.

Quality of teaching and learning

Since it is the school accommodation options that are being compared and not the teaching staff and since there were known leadership problems during the run up to the most recent Estyn report, the previous report should be used in any assessment of the performance of the facilities since the leadership was more comparable at this point. This earlier report would also then match the time period of the Cwmafan Primary School report used. Using the previous report, Bryn Primary appears to be very satisfactory premises for teaching!

Looking at the attendance figures based on the sample size a difference of less than 1% is statistically insignificant so this paragraph should simply state that both schools are the same. Since the measurements are taken in two different locations with different teams of observers this further suggests that statistically the figures are the same.

The report states that children entering Cwmafan Primary School would not be disadvantaged and are likely to attain good standards. On what evidence is this conclusion drawn? Children from Bryn will have an extra hour a day commuting time to deal with, will have added difficulties in attending extra-curricular activities, could face severe winter weather conditions that may mean missing school altogether at times while their fellow pupils from low-lying areas are still receiving lessons, may be ostracized for not coming from the same community as the majority of the class, etc. These are all factors that could disadvantage Bryn pupils both from Cwmafan pupils in the situation of a merger with Cwmafan and from the option of being taught in Bryn.

Provision

When looking at the Comparable time period Estyn reports, as mentioned earlier, there is little difference with Bryn just slightly better. The school grounds at Bryn are acknowledged as exceptionally good for children.

Leadership and Management

Teaching staff again has nothing to do with the proposal as the selection of good teaching staff is based on good selection rather than teaching location. An ultramodern new school could possibly be an incentive to recruitment but is not a factor with any of these proposals.

Interaction with local communities is rated as good for both Bryn and Cwmafan but clearly Bryn children could lose the Bryn community input if relocated to Cwmafan.

Resource management is quoted as a challenge for small schools but this could easily be addressed using 21st Century teaching aids and federation. See later notes on 21st Century teaching aids.

Pupil Numbers

The capacity figures quoted for Bryn school is unrealistic since there are only four class rooms. Reserving one of these for nursery pupils leaves just three classrooms. With a maximum class size of 30 that caters for a maximum of 90 full time even if classes could be perfectly balanced with 30 pupils in each class. A more realistic target would be 70 full time pupils which is close to the 2019 projection for capacity stated in the report. With the LDP showing considerable housing expansions within Bryn the 2019 estimates could easily be exceeded.

Also the LDP shows considerable housing expansion within the Cwmafan area. This could again cause the 2019 estimate of 356 pupils to be easily exceeded. If the Ponrhydyfen and Bryn pupils were to be added to this there would be severe overcrowding within Cwmafan school requiring costly capital expenditure to expand the school further restricting the already limited outdoor recreational areas and causing further disruption to schooling.

Where would the bus service pick up and drop off. The area around the school is already congested and presents a clear risk to safety before adding to the problem. The recent experience at Measteg school demonstrates the dangers of mixing pupils and buses. How will transport be delivered to guarantee no future fatalities will occur?

Surplus Capacity impact

Based on the above there is a real possibility that there will be under capacity within Cwmafan school within the lifetime of the LDP projections. How can spare capacity that currently exists with Bryn School be sacrificed when longer term predictions indicate that it may be required?

Financial Appraisal

Since BRAG does not have access to the financial details of Bryn School, this section will be left to the school governors to challenge.

Equality Impact Assessment

This is a glib statement with no references or supporting facts. May be true but could equally not be true.

Consultation Details

The consultation does not mention the residents of Bryn. Clearly these are interested parties that should be included in Appendix A. The school organisation code does not specifically mention residents but I think we have a strong claim and should continue to argue this claim.

The school organisation code does state that any capital costs of the proposal must be included along with School transport and staff costs. These are not in the document. Neither is the source from which capital funding will be provided and how any savings will be deployed.

The details of what will be done with the land and building of any closed schools must also be provided but has not been.

The consultation details defined in the guide have not been met. In addition, not all of the additional requirements, for a school closure, have been met.

Consultation with the pupils must involve the school governing bodies according to the guide. The consultation document only says pupils will be consulted during the course of the school day.

Are there any trusts involved with the land on which the school resides? If there are, these must be addressed before consultation can start! No reference to any such work is made in the report.

Where, in the course of consultation a new feasible option emerges, Consultation must start afresh.

The Legal Process

This appears to be more or less in line with the guide.

Process Timetable

Timescales appear far too short for a rational review of decisions before starting implementation. On this time scale one must assume implementation is running in parallel with consultation therefore assuming a predetermined outcome. This does go against the guidelines.

Additional Input from BRAG

BRAG wish to make the following alternative proposal.

Go for option 5 “Establish a federation of Bryn Primary, Cwmafan Primary and other nearby small schools” but with the additional actions to address the shortcomings of option 5

- Use 21st century technology to share resources and thereby reduce costs.
 - Examples being the use of video conferencing for staff meetings, virtual classrooms, cooperative projects, etc. (for example Skype).
 - Electronic transfer of students work to the controlling teachers.
 - When part of a class is in a virtual location it is reasonable to expect better classroom behaviour as this is what is seen in virtual meetings with adults.
 - This type of tuition prepares children for the increasingly virtual methods of teaching at University level as well as in the work place.
 - It could also better prepare them for responsible and safe use of social media.
 - It would give teachers access to far more classroom resources.
 - First class lectures are available on the Internet that could not be reproduced in a normal classroom.
 - Some schools are already moving to more CAL methods. This also can provide pupils with the opportunities to catch up on lessons at their own pace outside of normal school hours where they have missed lessons through absence or simply struggling with a particular topic.
- The school should be given more autonomy to manage budgets to reduce costs to bring it closer to the average per pupil cost. However, provision of schooling in rural areas will always be more expensive as even if delivered in an urban area there are still transport costs.
- Further savings could be made by utilising the school building beyond normal school hours for activities that are able to generate an income or save a council expenditure on alternative facilities provision.

The BCS has delivered lectures in conjunction with industry players such as BT on the many merits of virtual environments. The BCS could arrange such presentations for the decision makers of this proposal if required.

These alternative proposals would provide a richer teaching environment, enable high achievers to progress at a faster rate to match their abilities, better prepare children for the 21st century demands of a high tech work place as envisaged for Wales by the WAG.

The more Wales moves to using IT not only in schooling but also in business, to reduce the need to transport people around, the more pressure this takes off the transport network, global warming, pollution, road safety, etc. What better way to support a high tech economy than to familiarise the future workforce in the technology starting in the school place.

This option provides the council with the option to move schooling methods forward rather than retreating into overcrowded Victorian buildings simply to cut costs.