

# **PUBLIC MEETING OCTOBER 9<sup>TH</sup> 2014 RE: PROPOSED CLOSURE OF**

## **BRYN**

### **PRIMARY SCHOOL**

#### **PRESENT:**

BRAG MEMBERS Graham Rowlands Chair & Paul Bulmer  
CHAIR OF GOVERNORS Rob Phillips  
PARENT GOVERNOR Clare Dare  
COUNCILLORS David Williams, Dave Whitelock  
ASSEMBLY MEMBERS David Rees, Bethan Jenkins & Suzie Davies  
Bryn Primary Action Group

MEETING OPENED 18:10

Graham began by pointing out location of fire doors and meeting point in the event of an emergency. He went on to explain the purpose of the meeting and stressed the importance of all residents of Bryn fighting together to save our school. He pointed out that Bryn has the lowest crime rate in the county, probably aided by the village community spirit, and encouraged the audience to ask questions of the officials present with regard to the reasons behind proposed closure of our school.

Two current members of Bryn Primary, Lewis Dare & Billy Holloway, delivered their reasons for fighting the proposed closure, Graham thanked them and proceeded to state the importance of the school to our village culture and community. He stated that he had attended the school and that it had given him the foundations and values by which he had lived his life. Graham then asked our Chair of Governors Rob Phillips to speak.

Rob thanked BRAG for organising the meeting and everyone present for their support. He went on to say that should the proposals go ahead then our community school will be closed and our current pupils will lose their right to be educated in their community, any future learners will also lose that right. Rob stressed that there are other recommendations listed in the report which could work rather than the recommended closure. He then explained that as of October 1<sup>st</sup> permission was given at cabinet to carry out a consultation period beginning October 20th (Post meeting note: this has been changed to 10/11/14) on whether to agree to closure. Consultation period ends January 16th 2015. The LA (Local Authority) are facing budget cuts and need to make savings of £4million. Rob feels that the report produced underplays the school's strengths and over emphasises its shortcomings.

Rob went on to discuss the impact of the closure on our children. He spoke about the quality of education that our children deserve and that the report states they

should not be disadvantaged by the move. However Cwmafan is already a very large school and probably already overcrowded which has been played down in the report. Rob expressed concerns that the additional learning needs of some of our children will not be met in a larger school like Cwmafan, whereas at present, in Bryn School, these children are included in mainstream classes due to the smaller numbers and this is where their needs will be best met.

Rob mentioned that petitions have been circulated in the village and Cwmafan parents have also got a petition against the merger as they quite rightly are also concerned about the proposed closure of Bryn. Cwmafan classes are already large and if our children join then they will become even larger again.

Safety of travel to Cwmafan is a major concern for Rob. Walking is not an option due to the hostile, busy road, the practicalities of which are quite baffling. In inclement weather this safety issue is even more of a worry. He is also concerned about the route that will be used and travel needs to be looked into vigorously as part of the consultation.

Building conditions is another concern, the report states that backlog maintenance on Bryn is £470k and Cwmafan's is in total £1.5million. He said it is baffling as to why the Welsh Assembly weren't prepared to spend that amount of money but the Local Authority seem quite happy to do so.

Five options are listed on the report which are:

- Option 1 - Status quo: maintain Bryn Primary and Cwmafan Primary as separate schools.
- Option 2 – Establish a federation of Bryn Primary and Cwmafan Primary school
- Option 3 – Establish a federation of Bryn Primary, Cwmafan Primary and other nearby small schools
- Option 4 – Establish a 3-11 years English-medium primary school serving the catchment area of Bryn Primary and Cwmafan Primary schools based at the Cwmafan Primary school site.
- Option 5 – Establish a 3-11 years English-medium primary school serving the catchment area of Bryn Primary and Cwmafan Primary schools based at the Bryn Primary school site.

**Option 4 is the recommended option.** Rob feels Option 5 is a better option as Bryn is a better site to develop having lots of outdoor space on which to extend where Cwmafan already has limited outside space.

Rob stressed that if our school closes it'll effectively shut down our community, we would have nothing in the village if plans go ahead to also close our Community Centre. He also mentioned that our school is now being used more by our community outside of school hours.

The head teacher position has already been advertised for Cwmafan stating that it has 516 pupils. Their current roll plus Bryn and Pontrhydyfen pupil numbers totals 528. This is also a concern as it seems that this advertisement shows that the school closures have already been predetermined. A letter was sent to the Local Authority pointing this out but this met with the response that these pupil numbers were taking into account spare capacity at Cwmafan only and do not include our children.

Rob concluded his address by saying that we need to think carefully about what we want to happen. Changing nothing is probably not feasible but federation of Bryn, Pontrhydyfen, Cwmafan and Tonmawr is the option that he feels could be realistically achieved and this is what the governing bodies, in all schools proposed for closure, have agreed is the best chance we have to save our schools.

Clare Dare then read out a letter from Bryn and Llynfi surgeries to Aled Evans Director of Education. This letter stated they have recognised the growing development of Bryn and that this closure would, in their view, be detrimental to the continuing growth of the community.

Graham then produced a letter from Hywel Francis raising concerns with Aled Evans. He then stated that that BRAG do not favour any political party but want to establish how we can avoid the closure of our school. He then asked the audience to please direct any questions they have to the councillors and assembly members present.

Brian Rees addressed Councillor David Williams and stated that according to the Local Development Plan we could see substantial growth to our village and asked has that potential growth in school pupil numbers been taken into account? Rob Phillips added that the LA have recognised that numbers could increase to 70+ pupils but Bryn would still be classed as a small school.

Brian then stated that the current Bryn roll is what Cwmafan numbers have been based on and what happens if they are unable to accommodate extra children? David Rees, Labour, agreed that this was a valid point and that Cwmafan school is not fit for purpose and he has serious concerns as to its long term viability. He stressed that we as a community must use our voice.

Brian then asked, what is the Welsh Assembly policy on class sizes? David Rees responded that maximum size for juniors is 30 children and this reduces to 25 for infant classes. He added that he has asked for a breakdown of class sizes as this is an issue in Cwmafan and that he agrees that reducing spare capacity in schools is an efficiency measure but at the moment Cwmafan is not fit to house the extra numbers. He also said that a safe travel route has to be looked at very carefully. He has himself witnessed a bus mounting the kerb when trying to turn. He fully agrees that the road outside Cwmafan School is unsafe now without added traffic

from Pontrhydyfen and Bryn.

He reiterated that Bryn as a community have to voice how important it is that the school learns about the community from the community. He added that now the extent of the cuts are known and they are not as bad as first thought, we should be challenging the Educational and Community Impact. He also suggested that it may be a good idea to get an independent estimate for the maintenance costs for Bryn.

**Action Point: Bryn Primary Action Group/BRAG/Parent Governors to arrange for an independent estimate of backlog maintenance for Bryn Primary. Firstly to obtain list of necessary works as reported by ESTYN inspectors.**

Gaynor Bowen spoke about the success of federation and agrees that we have a good argument to push for this. She added that it might be an idea for the Bryn Primary Action Group to contact the Afan Valley Federation for further information on how federation works.

**Action Point: Bryn Primary Action Group/Parent Governors to contact Afan Valley Federation for more information.**

Dianne Thomas asked David Rees, Labour, if he is going to support our fight to stop our school closure. David answered that he fully supports us and is going to push for federation and we should keep up the pressure on the local authority.

Eric Paterson stated that NPTCBC have refused planning for all future development under the Urban Development Programme and the only way planning could be granted would be by an independent inspection.

Councillor David Williams agreed that there are no plans for building homes in Bryn but that planning has been passed by the UDP for two hundred homes at the Western Log site.

A villager then made the point that should these homes go ahead then how would Cwmafan School accommodate these extra children?

**Action Point: This question to be included when village question log created.**

Dianne Thomas responded that she had spoken to Steve Davies in planning only that morning and it had been confirmed that five semidetached homes have been granted planning in Bryn and has been named The Willows.

Graham then asked how would our nursery children get to Cwmafan School? David Rees answered that he had known areas where non-compulsory age children paid to travel on a school bus so this could be what would happen for our under-fives. This would also impact on after school clubs for those children who are bussed to school as they wouldn't be able to take part unless they could be

collected after clubs finished.

John Thomas asked Suzy Davies, Conservative AM, & Bethan Jenkins, Plaid Cymru AM, why £1.3 million is being spent on the closure of Junction 41? Suzy Davies answered that was a question for Edwina Heart. She went on to thank the village for her invitation to the meeting and that she supported small schools and we had a fight on our hands. She personally likes the option of federation and made the meeting aware of the schools closure handbook which would, in her view, be of a great benefit to an effective campaign. She also thinks we should challenge maintenance costs and ensure that the LA completes a Community Impact Assessment as this hasn't been done as yet. She added that ESTYN like big schools although there are only twenty five with over 400 pupils. She advised that we should query timescales as it would be tight to get this all in place by September 2015, could take until Nov 2015. She agrees that the advertisement for a Cwmafan head does suggest that there is a presumption of closure already. It may be an idea to look at the school organisation code and if feasible voice objections, this could be a key challenge. She went on to say that there is new guidance available on safety and that we should ask what will happen to the school land, is it being sold? Are there any clauses that the land cannot be sold? Suzy ended by stating that she is fully in support of our campaign and that she wishes us well.

**Action Point: Action Group/BRAG/Parent Governors to take on board Suzy's suggestions, use the schools closure handbook, challenge maintenance costs, ensure CIA is completed, query proposed timescales for proposed changes, use the school organisation code and query whether land school is on is intended for sale, if so any clauses we can bring to light.**

Bethan Jenkins then took the floor and suggested that the community should form a group who could put together a plan to make a collective decision on what we want for our school and how we go about this is all in the school code. She added that we should also question why the other options have not been recommended, why is federation not a recommended option? She went on to say now that the allocation is known and is not as bad as expected then request that the LA review their proposals, where are they prioritising their funding. She added that we should challenge the increased travel costs versus the standard of education that our children can expect at Cwmafan. She advises every household to write a letter of objection from the heart, use facts but also use emotion. Use our passion to make the LA understand why they cannot close our school. She fully agrees that the £1.3 million being spent on the closure of Junction 41 is a waste of money and she is in full support of our campaign and wishes us well with it.

**Action Point: Action Group/BRAG/Parent Governors to take on board Bethan's suggestions, question why federation is not the recommended option, request that LA review their proposals, challenge increased travel costs versus standard of education and encourage all households to complete objection letters.**

Councillor Dave Whitelock then spoke and said that under the Local Development Plan Cwmafan have large developments afoot. He went on to say that his main concern about the recommended option is the issue of transporting our children safely to Cwmafan. He drives coaches and HGVs for a living and argues that there is no safe bus route from Bryn to Cwmafan School without it going all the way down to Port Talbot which will be very costly. He stated that by law children of compulsory school age (age five) are entitled to free home to school transport and that NPTCBC cannot change that. He added that it is imperative that all villagers attend the Community Impact Assessment meeting to voice our objections and make it as difficult as possible for the LA. He then encouraged all households to write to Steve Phillips the Chief Executive of the LA and Aled Evans Director of Education listing their concerns and asking questions about safe routes and costings on this. He confirmed that the consultation period starts October 20<sup>th</sup> and that any success stories (past & present) from the school should be brought to the LA's attention. When composing letters make content factual and don't invent children. He concluded by saying that he is behind our campaign 100% and if anyone has any queries please don't hesitate to contact him by phone or e-mail.

Brian Rees asked Councillor David Williams if his position as the Chair of Governors for Cwmafan School affects him in supporting the campaign to save Bryn school and can the village rely on his support? David answered that he is able to support the campaign as he has been instructed that he can do so by his solicitor.

Darrall Thomas then asked David why he didn't speak up for Bryn School in the cabinet meeting on October 1<sup>st</sup>? David explained that his solicitor had advised him not to speak but that he had met with Aled Evans prior to the cabinet meeting to pledge his support for Bryn School. He then went on to quote the unfilled spaces percentage, the costings per pupil in Bryn v Cwmafan , backlog maintenance in Bryn and potential savings that closure will accrue and the ESTYN/Autumn Core visit which rated Bryn as a 'cause for concern' school (all these are listed in the PDF report on BRAG website under school closure). He added that he had questioned Aled Evans about federation but Aled sees this as a nonstarter as it will be as costly as it is now even though it means that there will be one head teacher covering 2/3 schools and possible sharing of staff.

Rob Phillips, Chair of Bryn governors, then responded by stating that the report was selective in what it included about the ESTYN inspection findings. He added that the Autumn Core visit was only a snapshot of the fuller picture of the circumstances at the time which has been used against us. He added that it seems Aled Evans seems to have already made his mind up although the school has excellent prospects of improvement. There were leadership issues at that time which have already improved enormously.

Brian Rees corrected Councillor David Williams over the cost per pupil at Cwmafan that he had quoted.

Steve Jenkins asked David Williams that, as Cwmafan School would be increasing its pupil numbers to over five hundred, would it be up to standard for Health & Safety Regulations by September 2015? No comment from David Williams

Dianne Thomas then stood to explain to the meeting that the circumstances leading up to the ESTYN inspection were tragic and the LA were asked to help which they did, Aled Evans was thrilled with the outcome of the inspection.

John Thomas asked David Williams, why is our Council Tax increasing when our local amenities are shutting down?

David then quoted a list of 2015-2016 cuts from the cabinet's report dated 25.9.14 some quoted were:

School cuts £5.8 million  
Community centres 450k  
Arts 35k  
Youth services 100k  
Libraries 190k  
TU 25k  
Margam Park 100k  
Blaengwynfi Miners 45k

A villager then stated that if our school closes then we will effectively become a retirement village as no one with children of school age will want to move in.

Bethan Jenkins stated that Young People must be consulted as part of the consultation process as part of the Young People's Rights. The Children's Commissioner must also be consulted as part of the process. She then advised that we need to decide on our action points for the way forward.

Dianne Thomas then spoke up to say that it had taken three years for the lottery to give Bryn £86k to transform the old tennis courts and that our children have designed the improvements. The lottery had also funded the school with £56k six years ago and this provided the money for our children's trim trail. The lottery can see that our village is worth developing why can't the LA see it. Pontrhydyfen and Tonmawr parent governors have admired our school's outside space but the LA fail to recognise the school's strengths. She added that "now is the time for our village to say no to the council's plans, no not on our patch"!

Paul Bulmer discussed the 'Questions on School Closure' slide displayed by projector.

Advised residents to submit their letters of objection on or after the start of the official consultation period. Letters should point out that the LA have stated that the proposed closures have nothing to do with cost but are for the improvement of our children's education- how can bigger classes improve education? Also point

out that the impact on the community has not yet been taken into consideration. There are links to increased crime and anti-social behaviour when community spirit is lost.

Graham Rowlands then advertised the BRAG website and advised the need for clear documentation so to please complete form with e-mails addresses where appropriate, BRAG will display letter templates on their website but he stressed that letters need to be individually tailored for everyone's personal circumstances He stated that BRAG & the Bryn Primary Action Group will help community to draft letters and an open day will be arranged for this purpose- date and time to be confirmed.

Member of public asked Rob Phillips, has he considered Federation as an option? Rob replied that he had and that the governing body of all schools involved are united against closures but feel federation is the way forward.

Member of public asked should the meeting take a vote on those for federation and those against. Graham agreed that we could but audience felt it was too early to vote on this.

Graham closed the meeting by explaining that Officers of the Local Authority are obliged to attend a public meeting for open questions and that this will be arranged for a future date.

Meeting closed at 19:55.

Minutes written by Rebecca Hedley Bryn Primary Action Group