

Estyn response to consultation from Rhondda Cynon Taf to open a new 3-19 special school and introduce catchment areas for the special schools in the county.

This report has been prepared by Her Majesty's Inspectors of Education and Training in Wales.

Under the terms of the School Standards and Organisation (Wales) Act 2013 and its associated Code, proposers are required to send consultation documents to Estyn. However, Estyn is not a body which is required to act in accordance with the Code and the Act places no statutory requirements on Estyn in respect of school organisation matters. Therefore, as a body being consulted, Estyn will provide their opinion only on the overall merits of school organisation proposals.

Estyn has considered the educational aspects of the proposal and has produced the following response to the information provided by the proposer.

Summary/Conclusion

The proposals are likely to maintain or improve the standard of education provision in the area.

Description and benefits

Rhondda Cynon Taf (RCT) local authority has given a clear rationale for the proposal to build a new 3-19 special school, demonstrating increased demand for special school places. The proposal will add a further 180 places to the capacity of the special school sector in RCT.

The proposal is less clear about the rationale for introducing catchment areas for the existing and proposed new special schools. The general reason given is to 'better manage' the allocation of special school placements. However, it is not clear what the problem is with the current arrangement, in which the majority of pupils attending special schools go to the school closest to where they live. Also, Maesgwyn Special School is not included on the catchment maps in the proposal. However, if parents of pupils at Maesgwyn who live in the catchment area of another school decide that they want their children closer to home, that will impact on pupil numbers at Maesgwyn. It would be helpful if the school was included fully within the proposal.

RCT appears to have provided a detailed description of the proposal to date. The projected timetable and process for statutory procedures are set out clearly, including how children and young people will be consulted. However, the date for the proposed drop-in session falls within the summer holiday period, and this could stop some staff, parents/carers and learners from contributing. There is no clear timeline given for the subsequent phases of the proposal beyond the aspiration that the new school will be built no later than the 2026 academic year.

The local authority has set out clearly and fairly the expected benefits and disadvantages when compared with the status quo. It is not clear, however, why the proposer considers that there is a risk of increased transport costs from the proposal.

The proposer has considered alternatives to the proposal and given reasons as to why they have been discounted these. However, while stating that a range of other sites were considered for the new school and that a number of appropriate criteria were used to identify the site near Tonypany as the favoured site, there is insufficient information about where the other sites are or why they were discounted. This makes it difficult to reach an objective conclusion as to whether the proposed site is the best one.

The local authority explains suitably how the proposal supports the targets in the local authority's Welsh in Education Strategic Plan (WESP) in its Welsh language impact assessment. The proposed new school will be English medium. The proposal explains the benefits of teaching Welsh in state-of-the-art facilities and the opportunities for community use, which might include Welsh language classes. However, the proposal does not make clear what proportion of the 670 pupils currently attending special schools in RCT are Welsh speakers, whether their numbers are increasing or not, and how their language needs are being met.

The proposal estimates that the cost of designing and building the new school will be £53.3 million. Up to 75% of the funding for new special schools comes from the Welsh Government through the Sustainable Communities for Learning Programme, and up to 100% of costs directly associated with making the school net zero carbon. There is no further information about how the local authority will fund its share of the building costs or subsequent revenue costs. There are council offices on the proposed site, which are soon to be vacated. It is not clear from the proposal whether the existing buildings will be demolished to allow the new school to be built or whether they will be refashioned and repurposed.

Educational aspects of the proposal

RCT has considered the impact of the proposals on the quality and standards in education within the new school for each of the five areas of Estyn's common inspection framework. The building of new facilities, especially those taking into account the complex needs of special school pupils, is likely to have a beneficial impact on their learning and well-being. The proposal includes a brief summary of the outcomes and recommendations from the last Estyn inspection reports for the existing four special schools. However, it does not include any consideration of how the new school may have a positive impact on the special school sector overall within RCT, for example through the sharing of good practice and professional learning.

The local authority is seeking to ensure that the disruption to learners is minimised. As this is a new school, on a new site, there is no disruption to learners during the design and build phases. When the new school is opened and the proposed catchment areas are in place, there will be no mandatory transfers of pupils from one school to another. Parents of pupils living within the catchment area of the new school will have the option to move their children there if they wish. It is envisaged that the new school will 'grow organically' over time. However, no consideration has been given as to what might happen if the school is oversubscribed, or underutilised either immediately or a later point.