

Estyn's Response to the proposal to close Tref-Y-Rhyg Primary School with pupils transferring to Tonyrefail Community School.

Introduction

This report has been prepared by His 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

Estyn considers that the proposal is likely to, at least, maintain the standard of education provision in the area.

Description and benefits

The local authority has set out a clear rationale for its proposal. It outlines well the many advantages of transferring pupils to a purpose-built school fit for 21st century education. Tonyrefail Community School is an all through school that provides secondary education provision for the catchment area of Tref-Y-Rhyg Primary School. As Tonyrefail Community School is a new school, it is graded 'A' for condition and 'A' for suitability. It has facilities that are regularly used by the local community ensuring that others are benefitting from the new resources available. The school site and building are fully compliant with the Equality Act 2010. As part of the significant investment at Tonyrefail Community School, there was a particular focus on enhancing the onsite and offsite traffic management arrangements, including improved staff parking and the creation of a dedicated home to school transport drop off area.

The local authority has identified a decline in pupil numbers in Tref-Y-Rhyg Primary School over the past five years. The school is operating below its pupil number capacity. The current building requires major repairs and refurbishment with the backlog maintenance work costing around £381,040, which does not include the funding required to improve accessibility and comply with the Equality Act 2010.

The local authority has provided a suitably detailed description of the proposal which includes an estimated timetable for statutory procedures.

In the main, the proposer identifies clearly and fairly the expected benefits and disadvantages when compared with the status quo and how they will manage any risk. Currently no pupils in Tref -Y- Rhyg Primary School live more than 1.5 miles for Tonyrefail Community School.

The proposer has considered, in part, the impact of the changes on learner travel arrangements. The proposal sets out that the local authority has exercised discretionary powers afforded to it under the provisions of the Learner Travel (Wales) Measure 2008 to make a more generous provision to pupils. The eligibility criterion for walking distance for pupils at their nearest suitable school has been set at 1.5 miles, instead of 2 miles as required by the measure. This is provided to pupils who meet the 1.5 mile eligibility criterion from the start of the foundation phase.

The proposer sets out four suitable alternatives to its proposal and gives acceptable reasons as to why they have discounted them. All suitable alternatives would involve considerable financial investment which is not currently viable.

The proposer has identified potential risks with the current and projected surplus capacity at Tonyrefail Community School indicating a lack of space available to accommodate the pupils proposed to relocate from Tref -Y-Rhyg Primary School. To mitigate against this during the transfer period, the proposer plans to increase the capacity at Tonyrefail Community School by 30 places. Moving on from 2025, the proposer identifies the need to adhere to strict implementation of the admissions criteria to ensure that pupils living in the catchment area access the school places they require and take priority over out of catchment pupils.

The proposal takes good account of the impact of the proposals on Welsh medium provision within the local authority and the extent to which the proposal supports the targets in the local authority's Welsh in Education Strategic Plan (WESP). The proposal recognises the need to provide more opportunities for pupils to use Welsh in different contexts in schools and outlines plans to support this within Tonyrefail Community School. In addition to this, the proposal acknowledges that within the catchment area of Tref-y-Rhyg Primary School there is a Welsh medium primary school with sufficient capacity for pupils from this school to attend if this is what parents/carers decide. The proposal identifies and appears to make available support to pupils moving from an English to Welsh medium school, if necessary.

The proposer has provided a Welsh Language Impact Assessment, Equality Impact Assessment, and a Community Impact Assessment as part of this proposal. Estyn provides their opinion only on the overall merits of school organisation proposals and does not evaluate the Welsh Language Impact Assessment, the Equality Impact Assessment, or the Community Impact Assessment.

Educational aspects of the proposal

The proposal suitably considers the educational aspects of the proposal. It identifies the outcomes of both schools most recent Estyn inspection and the recommendations for improvement. To some degree, it considers how the move to all age school site will help to address these recommendations. For example, the proposal identifies that 'More pupils will have access to a 21st century learning environment that provides enhanced teaching spaces, dedicated resource areas, stimulating learning environments and state of the art ICT equipment'. The proposal identifies how provision will be further enhanced as a fit-for-purpose school building would help staff to provide broader learning experiences which would contribute to the delivery of a balanced curriculum, in line with the new Curriculum for Wales. A better learning environment will also provide pupils with greater flexibility and therefore greater choice in their learning experiences. The proposal considers the benefits of a 3-19 school in terms of the continuity of experience and the negation of transition dips in pupil performance.

The proposer considers that the proposed changes will enhance the learning, well-being and flexibility in the experiences provided for all the pupils. The proposal considers, in some part, the impact of the proposal on vulnerable groups, including children with Additional Learning Needs, but does not provide sufficient information in this area. It does note that there will be 'A fully accessible building and the provision of flexible spaces which will allow Tonyrefail Community School to extend its good practice and facilitate further interventions, including ways to nurture pupils as well as continued engagement with families and the local community.' However, it does not identify specifically how it will meet the needs of the increase in the number of ALN pupils (9) who will potentially transfer to the school and almost double their current number of ALN pupils (10).

The proposal appears to have considered the capacity for leadership which a larger school can provide with more professional and progression opportunities for the teaching and support staff and greater scope for distributed models of leadership.

The proposal notes that school reorganisation proposals inevitably cause some disruption and uncertainty. It identifies that experience shows that this can be kept to a minimum through meaningful engagement throughout the consultation process and has included opportunities for pupils to respond to the consultation. The proposal appears to recognise the need for targeted, positive, and meaningful transition support for the pupils of Tref-Y-Rhyg if they transfer schools, as they become familiar with their new setting.